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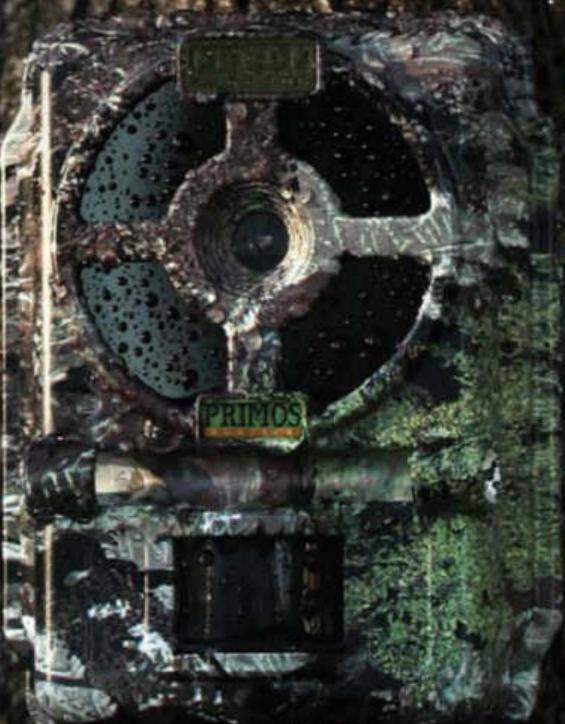


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Don't Believe in Lullabies

It was a muggy, misty early season afternoon when I climbed to my treestand. Few deer had been moving during daylight that week. If you listened to all the talk, it was too hot to be deer hunting.

The stand faced a prime bedding area — a thick pine grove — and a lush field to the west had been the preferred feeding area for about two weeks. I had been perched in my stand for nearly four hours when the sun finally dipped below the tree line. That's when I saw him — a beautiful Pope-and-Young-class buck. He was still carrying crimson highlights on his neck and forehead from his summer coat.

The buck bobbed and weaved through the pines and then walked straight for the corner of the field. It was the first deer I'd seen that day, but that didn't matter, because he was definitely one I wanted to shoot. The buck took the same route I had watched many of the other deer use during previous sits from distant spots. He had no clue I was there, and he soon walked to the base of my tree.

The buck was cautious but not overly alert. In fact, he was so at ease with his surroundings that he walked past my steel ladder without giving it a second look. My all-encompassing scent-free approach obviously helped with that, but before

this particular hunt I had doused my Muck® boots with scent-killing spray. To this day, I swear that is the only reason why that buck hung around so long. How long? Well, he stood there for exactly eight minutes ... I know, because I timed him!

My heart hammered as I stared straight down through the mesh-grate platform while waiting for the buck to make his next move. He did, eventually, by walking perfectly into a shooting lane. He stopped at 12 yards and quartered away. My Easton arrow went through him so fast that I never heard it make contact. The buck dropped within sight.

The scene at the gas station was quite amusing. Drenched with sweat from retrieving the buck and loading it into the truck, I headed for the cooler, grabbed a bottle of soda pop and then walked toward the cashier. Another guy, donning a camouflage cap, was paying for his gasoline.

"Out there bowhunting, huh?" he asked. "I don't even waste my time during the early season lull. I wait till the rut."

I couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah, it's pretty tough," I said, smiling toward the clerk. "Oh, by the way, I have a buck to register."



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Deadly vocalization techniques for luring in bruiser white-tailed bucks. ■ by Joe Lieb

Calling Mature Bucks

When you're after a true monster buck, talk to him in a way that threatens his territorial and dominant instincts. Make him believe there's an intruder in his house.

One November day during the mid-1980s, I went out for what I thought would be a typical afternoon bowhunt. The weather was perfect, and I was fired up. I didn't have a clue the hunt would expose me to something that would help me take mature bucks.

Since that day, I've perfected my calling techniques for big deer. These tactics won't work every time, but they have the potential to make any hunter more successful.

On that November day, I pulled into my spot about noon. The area featured a valley that was about 1½ miles long and 200 yards wide. The valley floor was covered with second-growth timber choked with weeds and multiflora rose bushes, with the exception of a 5-acre corn field on the northern end. Three draws converged north of the corn field, and deer used those as travel routes to the corn from their bedding areas on hillsides and hilltops. It was tricky getting there, but that's where I wanted to hunt.

After an uneventful 90 minutes on stand, I caught movement about 150 yards away on the hillside to the east. A 160-class 10-pointer was slowly and deliberately working toward me. The buck had closed the gap to about 70 yards when I heard a grunt on the hillside to the west. I soon spotted a doe about 50 yards away, and about 50 steps behind her was a 140-class 10-pointer. Just as I saw him, the buck started after the doe. Although I'd heard trailing grunts before, that marked the first time I'd seen the buck and doe when it occurred.

Because of the terrain, the buck on the eastern hillside couldn't see the buck and doe across the valley. However, he was facing toward them at full attention. I looked back to the west and saw the doe had run



Charles Alsheimer

ng



south about 40 yards and stopped. The 140-inch buck closed the distance between them to about 20 yards, trail-grunting all the way. Then the doe let out five bleats.

The 140-class buck trail-grunted right up behind her and immediately mounted her and let out some short, deep, fast-paced tending grunts. However, the doe took a few steps, and the buck slid off her back. Then he let out a long, loud, throaty grunt. He moved up, mounted the doe again and immediately started tending grunting. The doe started moving away again, and then I heard brush breaking from where the 160-class

deer had been. I looked over to see him run across the valley floor toward the breeding pair.

As the larger buck approached, the doe ran a short distance and stopped, but the 140-class buck stayed put, staring at the doe, oblivious that the other buck was running right at him. The 160-class buck caught him in the left rear quarter and almost knocked him off his feet, his antlers penetrating the smaller buck's hide with at least 3 points. The smaller buck regained his footing and ran over the hill with the other buck in pursuit. That was the last I saw of them.

I stayed in my stand until dark,

but all I could think about was the scenario I'd witnessed. After the hunt, I spent a sleepless night in the back of my pickup, knowing a door had opened into the world of deer vocalizations — a world I hadn't realized even existed.

I wondered why the bucks had reacted the way they did. Was it territorial, dominance, breeding or a combination? I also wondered if I could duplicate what I'd heard well enough to achieve the same response.

Busted!

I practiced doe bleating by mouth and grunting with my grunt tube, an older nonadjustable model that sounded good but had the pitch of a second-year buck. After about a week of practicing, I was confident enough to take my new technique to the woods.

The first night out, I didn't get any response to my calling. However, I saw a 140-inch buck trailing a doe about 80 yards away, and I learned my first calling lesson: It's an exception to call a buck way from a doe he's trailing. And,— of course, the closer the doe is to being ready to breed, the more difficult that becomes.

That season closed without any great success, except for the knowledge I gained. The next year, I had a new Quaker Boy grunt tube with an adjustable reed. I couldn't get what I considered to be a great doe bleat out of the call, so I continued to do that by mouth. But I could produce a deep, somewhat raspy mature buck grunt that sounded excellent. My reasoning for using a deeper buck grunt still rings true: I want to sound like the caliber of animal I'm trying to call in.

I realized my calling was breeding oriented, so I waited until the chase phase of the rut was in full swing. I set up on a saddle on a timbered hillside. In front of the saddle, to the east, the hill dropped about 75 yards to the valley floor, where there was a 10-acre cut corn field.

It was a perfect morning — overcast and cold, with a slight northwesterly breeze. Just as it got light enough to see, two small bucks walked through the saddle scent-checking for does. About 20 minutes after they left, I started calling. Just as I finished my sequence, I saw a huge buck step out of the brush on the edge of the corn field across the valley below. He stared toward me for a few minutes, and then started walking south along the edge of the field. He was moving with a purpose, like he had somewhere to be. I couldn't understand why he didn't cross the corn field and come to the call.

After he walked about 50 yards, I called to him again. He stopped and

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looked toward me briefly, but then looked straight ahead and started moving again. I lost sight of him as he rounded the corner of the hill to the south. I immediately lost faith in my newly discovered calling technique. A thousand questions entered my mind, and I didn't have an answer for any of them.

Five minutes after I last saw the buck, I figured I had nothing to lose, so I called again — with no results. After a few minutes, I figured I'd try once more and then quit. As I got about halfway through my sequence, I glanced to the south toward the end of the saddle. The buck was 60 yards away, staring right at me. He had me made, and there was nothing I could do about it. We stared at each other for a couple of minutes, and then he turned around and slowly walked out of sight. I still remember my last look at that huge rack as it disappeared.

It's good that I couldn't read that buck's mind during our stare down, because I would have felt worse. His thoughts probably started with "stupid."

When I climbed out of the stand that morning, I had replayed every minute of the hunt in my mind 1,000 times. Although I was disgusted with the outcome and my nerves were frazzled, I understood the mistakes I'd made. I also was on my way to learning a new aspect of bowhunting that would give me more respect for the intelligence of a mature buck.

How I Do It

I believe the typical grunt most deer hunters use is more of a social call than we like to believe. It's a common sound, and because of that, you can only speculate about how a mature buck will respond to it. Yes, grunts call in countless whopper bucks each year, but think about some of your experiences with grunting. Have you ever had a big buck stop at your grunt only to look toward you for a minute before continuing on his original path? Me, too. No amount of grunting would bring him back, would it? Exactly.

I believe that when you're after a true monster buck, you must talk to him in a way that threatens his territorial and dominant instincts. You're trying to make him believe there's another mature buck in his area breeding does, so you'll want to wait for the correct phase of the rut before using this strategy.

I start my calling sequence with the deep, guttural trailing grunts of a mature buck. These are fast paced and about 20 vocalizations. Then I utter four to seven doe bleats that are long and drawn out; each lasting about three to four seconds. I then let out about 10 to 12 trailing grunts, three to five doe bleats and then a tending grunt. That sequence lasts about 15 seconds, and each vocalization is short and very fast paced, with the last grunt in the sequence consisting of a full breath blown through the tube as loud as possible.

While blind-calling, I'll run through that sequence every 20 to 30 minutes. When I'm calling to a buck I can see, I run through the sequence just enough for him to start coming in. By then, he knows my exact location and has already committed to respond. Any more calling can give you up.

Also, be creative. Bring a sapling or bush into the stand, and slap it on the side of the tree while you're calling. Or put a decoy out where a buck that's responding to your call can see it. That's one of the deadliest setups I know.

Will this calling technique bring in mature bucks 100 percent of the time? Not a chance. However, I've had much more success at calling in mature bucks than I've had with rattling.

If you use calling as a tool, perfect it, and put it in your bag of tricks, you will be more successful.

— Joe Lieb is an accomplished trophy whitetail hunter from Illinois.



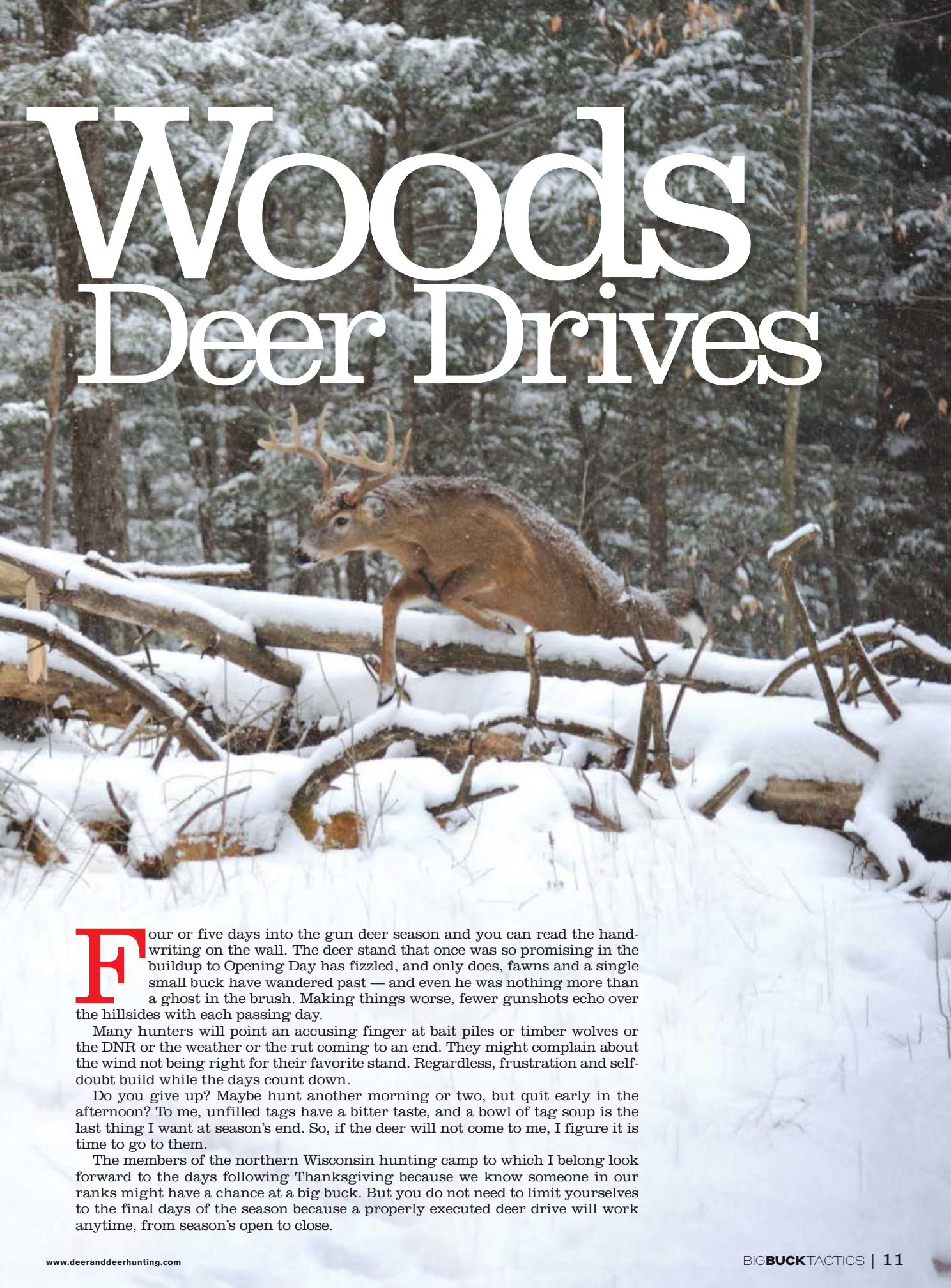
Grunt calls and rattling antlers create the scenario that all is not well in the whitetail woods. Bucks fight to defend their territories and the does within. That's why replicating these sounds is so effective in luring bucks into bow or gun range.

A hunter wearing a bright orange vest and a red knit beanie is shown from the side and slightly behind, aiming a bolt-action rifle. He is in a snowy, wooded environment with snow-covered trees and branches. The word "Big" is printed in large, white, sans-serif letters across the top right corner.

Big

Deer driving is such a lost art that generations of whitetails might never have tried to sneak out of one. If the deer are not coming to you, go to them for a day or two and see what happens. ■ by Steve Heiting

Woods Deer Drives

A large buck deer stands on a snow-covered hillside, looking over its shoulder. The background is a dense forest of snow-laden evergreen trees.

Four or five days into the gun deer season and you can read the handwriting on the wall. The deer stand that once was so promising in the buildup to Opening Day has fizzled, and only does, fawns and a single small buck have wandered past — and even he was nothing more than a ghost in the brush. Making things worse, fewer gunshots echo over the hillsides with each passing day.

Many hunters will point an accusing finger at bait piles or timber wolves or the DNR or the weather or the rut coming to an end. They might complain about the wind not being right for their favorite stand. Regardless, frustration and self-doubt build while the days count down.

Do you give up? Maybe hunt another morning or two, but quit early in the afternoon? To me, unfilled tags have a bitter taste, and a bowl of tag soup is the last thing I want at season's end. So, if the deer will not come to me, I figure it is time to go to them.

The members of the northern Wisconsin hunting camp to which I belong look forward to the days following Thanksgiving because we know someone in our ranks might have a chance at a big buck. But you do not need to limit yourselves to the final days of the season because a properly executed deer drive will work anytime, from season's open to close.



The art of driving deer has largely been forgotten by today's deer hunter. Maybe it's because of increasingly fractionalized private woodlots, or maybe a whole generation of hunters

prefers treestands. Certainly, hunting camps are smaller on average than in years gone by. Most hunters just do not try to push deer anymore.

If overall deer activity grinds to a halt, take the game to them. Well-organized drives have accounted for many big bucks over the years and can produce when other tactics fail.

Still, our crew, usually numbering fewer than 10 hunters, takes on the challenge of driving big woods with gusto. When deer are not moving, whether because of the weather, the close of the rut, hunting pressure, or only-God-knows-what, it is time to make drives. You have to buy into the concept that individually your chances are not very good, but collectively, be there two hunters or 20 in your group, your odds will be better.

Know your local deer hunting regulations before you make drives. Wisconsin, where I live, allows "group" deer hunting, and a hunter may tag a deer shot by another as long as the tag holder is within shouting distance of the shooter. While this might sound trivial, the group deer hunting law legalized what most camps had practiced anyway. It is also important to know property boundaries because you do not want to trespass on land that belongs to others.

Deer Drives, in Theory

A deer drive works by having "drivers" walk through the woods toward the locations where other hunters, the "standers," are posi-

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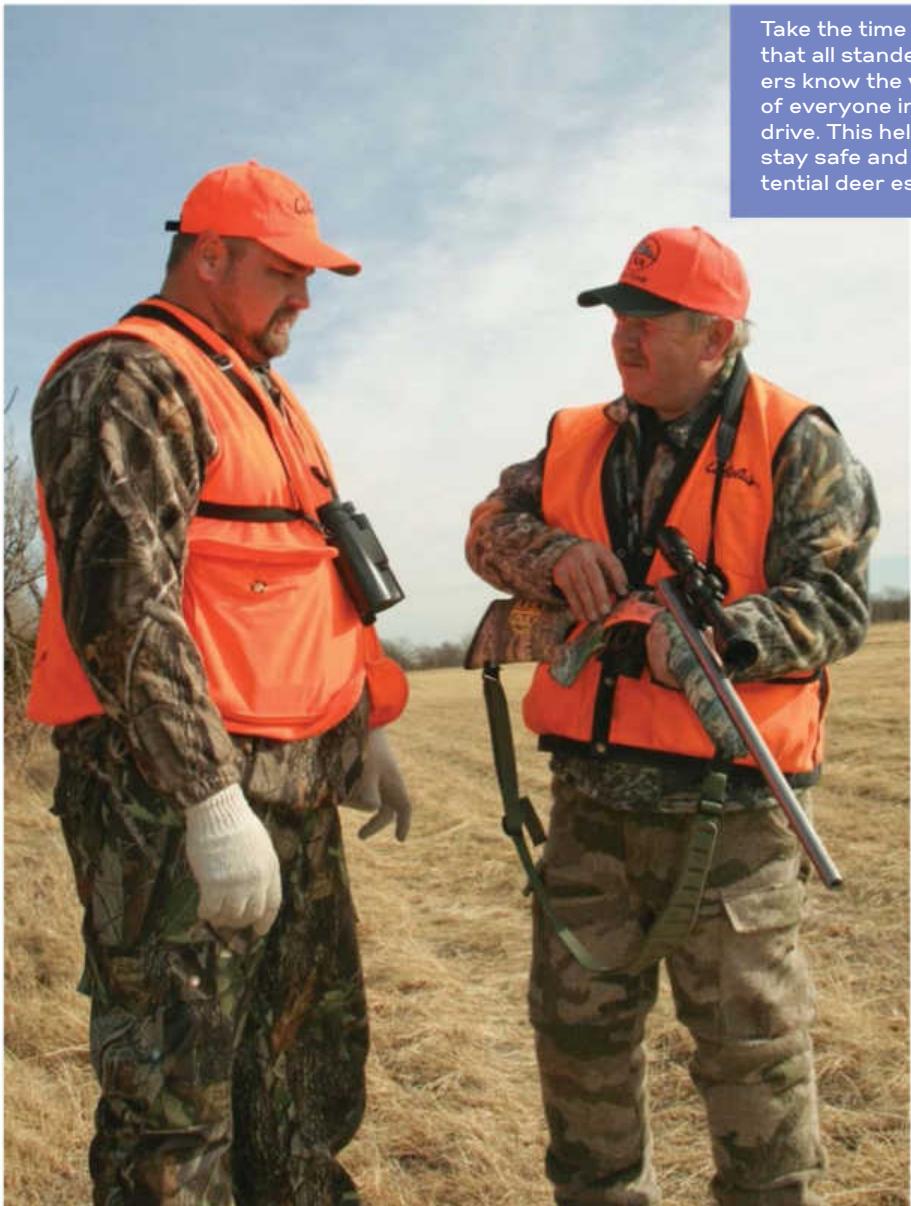
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Take the time to ensure that all standers and drivers know the whereabouts of everyone involved in the drive. This helps everyone stay safe and alert to potential deer escape routes.

tioned. The drivers move the deer, the standers intercept them. Usually, the number of standers will outnumber the drivers, often by a 2-to-1 or 3-to-1 margin. The biggest factor is trying to cover all known escape routes with standers. Even large parcels can be pushed by two or three drivers if they know the woods and where the deer will most likely be found.

Accept the fact that deer will squirt out in places you did not expect, but that is all part of the game. When everything comes together and a big buck is down, all the frustration of previous drives that did not work will be forgotten.

Every magazine article I've read about driving deer has been replete with drawings of supposedly magical drives in which the drivers make big circles or play follow-the-leader. These kinds of drives might apply in areas of small woodlots, but simply aren't

practical in the big woods. And, my camp has never done them, so I am not going to discuss them here. Rather, I am going to explain the subtleties of driving deer and you can take it from there.

Deer are creatures of habit. As long as there is a favorable food source nearby, most deer will continue to use it and bed in nearby cover. Bucks will come and go as the rut progresses, eventually returning to their home range when breeding ends. However, when pressed, deer will usually take the same escape route their ancestors used. Often this follows the lay of the land, other times it is merely a quick route from where they were spooked to the safety of thick cover. If you find such an escape route, either by clever sleuthing or merely stumbling across it, file it away because the deer will continue to use it for years.

The keys to driving the big woods

are similar to the basic tenets of deer hunting — stealth and playing the wind. Stealth means being able to quietly position standers in places you expect the deer to go when pushed, so logging roads and deer trails that allow easier access to stands are important. Standers must minimize noise — talking when discussing plans must be kept to a minimum, and then it must be in hushed tones. Once the standers are in place, their chances of killing a deer begin immediately because they might see a deer moving about on its own, well before the drive begins, or they might spot a deer pushed out by drivers or other standers getting into position. Standers must always stay alert.

As drivers get into position and wait for the standers to assume their places, they must also be quiet because there's nothing worse than pushing deer out before the standers are in place. And, occasionally, standers who are getting into position will bump deer in the direction of the drivers. There is no better feeling than when a buck is down before a drive even commences.

Position your standers where low ridges head toward a swamp, where a saddle allows quick access from a hillside bench to a river bottom, where fingers of brush provide cover while going from Point A to Point B ... you get the picture.

A great stand is in a ravine where the deer think they can quickly escape the drive, yet the standers can cover a large area because of the advantage that elevation affords. If a strip of big timber bisects a thicket, make sure it is covered by a stander. I am convinced that escaping deer look ahead to big timber for a reference point as they run through thick cover, and bucks with wide racks will often skirt the edge of big timber because it affords easier running.

If legal to do so, install ladder tree-stands before the season in the locations where the standers on your drives will later be posted. There are two advantages to getting your standers off the ground — they will cover a greater area, and the shots they take will be safer because they are angled downward. And ladders are a better choice than climbing stands because they allow quicker, quieter access.

The Drive Begins

The drive should start at a pre-arranged time. Drivers should walk at a pace similar to taking a simple hike in the woods. Forget what you've heard about barking or bang-

ing pie tins because with that kind of unwanted noise, deer will easily pinpoint the drivers, circle away from them and lie down. Such disturbances might work fine if there's a large number of drivers, but won't be very effective for a smaller group. If drivers sneak too slowly and with too little noise, deer seem to have a difficult time picking them out, so again they simply lie down until the pressure passes. You just about have to step on the deer to get them to go in this situation. A steady pace with an occasional pause to look around is a good plan.

That pause while walking is crucial for the drive's success. Often a big buck that is bedded as a drive commences might not make the effort to move if the driver does not walk closely, or "step on them," as the saying goes. Big bucks are old bucks, and it is possible they have seen drives before. They seem to know that if they run they become vulnerable, and they probably chose their current bedding area because they felt safe, so that is where they're going to stay.

But then a driver pauses ... we have no idea what a buck is thinking when this happens, but it is possible they believe they have been spotted. The longer you wait, the greater the test of the buck's nerves. How long should you pause before resuming your walk? Wait at least a 10-count, but if you are in an area from which you have pushed out bucks before, a 20-count is not out of the question. You cannot wait much longer because you still have a drive to make and you need to try to keep up with the other drivers, but they should be pausing occasionally, too, so this is not that big of an issue.

Drivers should always keep their eyes up, off the ground, and looking around as they walk. Quite often the deer will not run toward the standers but will go across the drive, and the buck you jump might be shot by one of the other drivers. Drivers should carry a GPS or, at the very least, flagging ribbon to mark where they have shot a deer. Make sure the deer is down, tag it and mark its location, and resume the drive because others are counting on you.

A GPS can be useful in the hands of every driver. True, many who have hunted for years can probably make a successful drive either by simply "knowing" the drive from past efforts, by watching the treeline, or by using a compass. However, many drives will be made by people who do not have the same experience. The "new blood" of a camp needs to learn sometime. A GPS with pre-loaded maps can instantly show a driver where he is in a drive, and if the positions of the standers are already marked with waypoints, the

Hunting in the Northwoods

Steve Heiting's obsession for hunting white-tailed deer in the big woods of the upper Great Lakes states and Canada has resulted in a book that instructs readers on how to hunt deer in the Northwoods.

Heiting, the managing editor of *Musky Hunter Magazine*, who has written, edited or contributed to 20 different books about musky fishing, made boot tracks in a different direction with the release of his first hunting book, "Hunting Northwoods Bucks."

"**Hunting Northwoods Bucks**" is a 200-page softcover book packed with 61 photos and illustrations. It is also available for all digital platforms through Amazon Kindle.

"My main passions in life are musky fishing and deer hunting, and I approach each with similar enthusiasm and dedication," Heiting said. "I'm all about muskies through the summer and early fall, but when the leaves start to change my focus is on whitetails."

Heiting has hunted deer on the public lands of the Northwoods for more than three decades, and has tagged big bucks with rifle, muzzle-loader and bow. Though he is an avid stand-hunter, Heiting has also been successful making deer drives, still-hunting and tracking. He addresses all of these methods in "**Hunting Northwoods Bucks**".

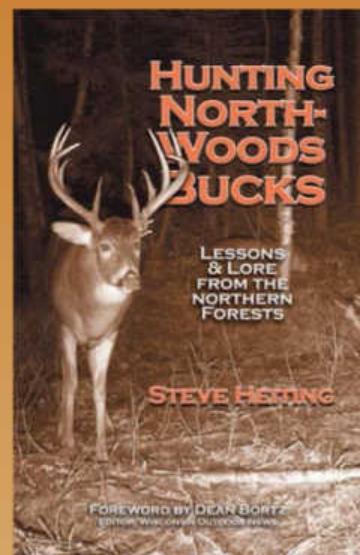
But "**Hunting Northwoods Bucks**" is more than a nuts-and-bolts how-to book. Heiting emphasizes his points with anecdotes from his time in the woods, and takes readers along on some of his favorite hunts. Included is the story of the hunt for his largest buck, a giant that he and a friend pursued for three seasons and had considered unkillable.

Other tales border on the surreal; visit a turn-of-the-20th-century Northwoods deer camp; and humorously chronicle the frustration of hunting for deer that Heiting suspects were smarter than he.

"I try to read everything I can about deer hunting, and I haven't found anything that focuses solely on Northwoods hunting," Heiting said. "My plan was to be informative with the book, but my hope was to make it fun to read."

The book includes a foreword by Dean Bortz, editor of *Wisconsin Outdoor News*.

"**Hunting Northwoods Bucks**" is available for \$14.95 plus \$3.99 shipping & handling from www.ShopDeerHunting.com. To get a signed copy from the author, visit www.SteveHeiting.com. Digital versions are available through Amazon Kindle.





Drivers should always keep their eyes up off the ground and stay ready, they will very often have just as good of a chance of shooting a deer as the standers.

drive will become much more precise because the drivers will come out right at the stands.

While walking, drivers should always poke through known bedding cover. Usually, this is the thickest cover in the drive — either grass, brush or evergreens — but it can often be the tops of ridges or hogbacks, or a flat overlooking a river- or creek-bottom.

One drive we make has a hillsides bench where deer like to overlook a river-bottom, and I have stood in the exact same spot more than a dozen times while standers in the river-bottom were shooting at deer. This drive requires the drivers to walk in a southwesterly direction.

Midway through the drive I bump into a logging road that runs north-south. I turn north, follow the road to the top of the hill, then step back into the woods and resume my southwesterly route, which is usually when things get exciting because that is where they bed. At times, I have heard the deer run down the hillside, and then counted the seconds until the shooting started.

A camp planning a deer drive must be conscious of the wind. Understand there is no perfect direction to push

deer that will work 100 percent of the time, but crosswind or upwind work the best.

I believe the single best direction to push deer is crosswind; the fact the most successful drives our camp has made were crosswind probably causes me to think this way. The deer usually won't want to run crosswind completely through the drive and usually turn into the wind at some point, so the standers for such a drive should be positioned in sort of a semi-circle. Some will be crosswind of the drivers' direction, others upwind.

At the start of a crosswind drive, the deer usually stay ahead of the drivers, seemingly content to know they can bail out into the wind if necessary. They might pick up a stander's scent stream and turn one way or the other; with luck the change of course will lead them to another stander.

A drive that goes directly into the wind requires more effort and/or standers to try to close off the end of the drive. As the drive commences, the deer will often head directly into the wind toward the standers, but they usually run into the odor stream of one of the standers and change course.

It is remarkable to see their tracks in snow go toward a stander, mill around a bit to assess their next move, and then turn crosswind just out of sight. Often, their direction change will be less than 200 yards from the standers' positions. If you don't have standers in crosswind positions, the deer will soon be out of the drive and nobody will see them.

If you try to push the deer downwind they'll have the drivers' positions pinpointed immediately and often will just lay low because they really don't like to move with the wind. If they do not simply bed down and let the drivers walk by, they will soon turn crosswind and again, nobody will see them. Occasionally, a stander positioned crosswind will see deer, but drives going downwind are essentially handicapped from the beginning.

Safety First

When you concentrate a number of hunters in a small area, and

a group of them is walking toward the others, the chances of every hunter's nightmare — an accidental shooting — increases. Safety is the foremost concern. Standers and drivers must be absolutely certain of their target when they pull the trigger. It's good to have an experienced hunter serve as a leader as the standers are dropped off. Not only does such a hunter know exactly where the standers should be positioned, he can instruct them where other standers will be posted, as well as where and when they can expect to see the drivers.

Our camp has a firm rule that standers never leave their posts until the drivers are out, regardless if they have shot at a buck. There could be more deer coming, and a moving stander might spook these animals and ruin his own chances as well as those of the other standers. More important, however, a situation in which a stander wanders in areas where others do not expect him could end horribly. Blaze orange does wonders for hunter safety, but its brilliance can still be swallowed up quickly by thick woods.

— Steve Heiting is a well-known musky fishing expert from northern Wisconsin. He is also an avid deer hunter and has more than 30 years of experience hunting the big woods.



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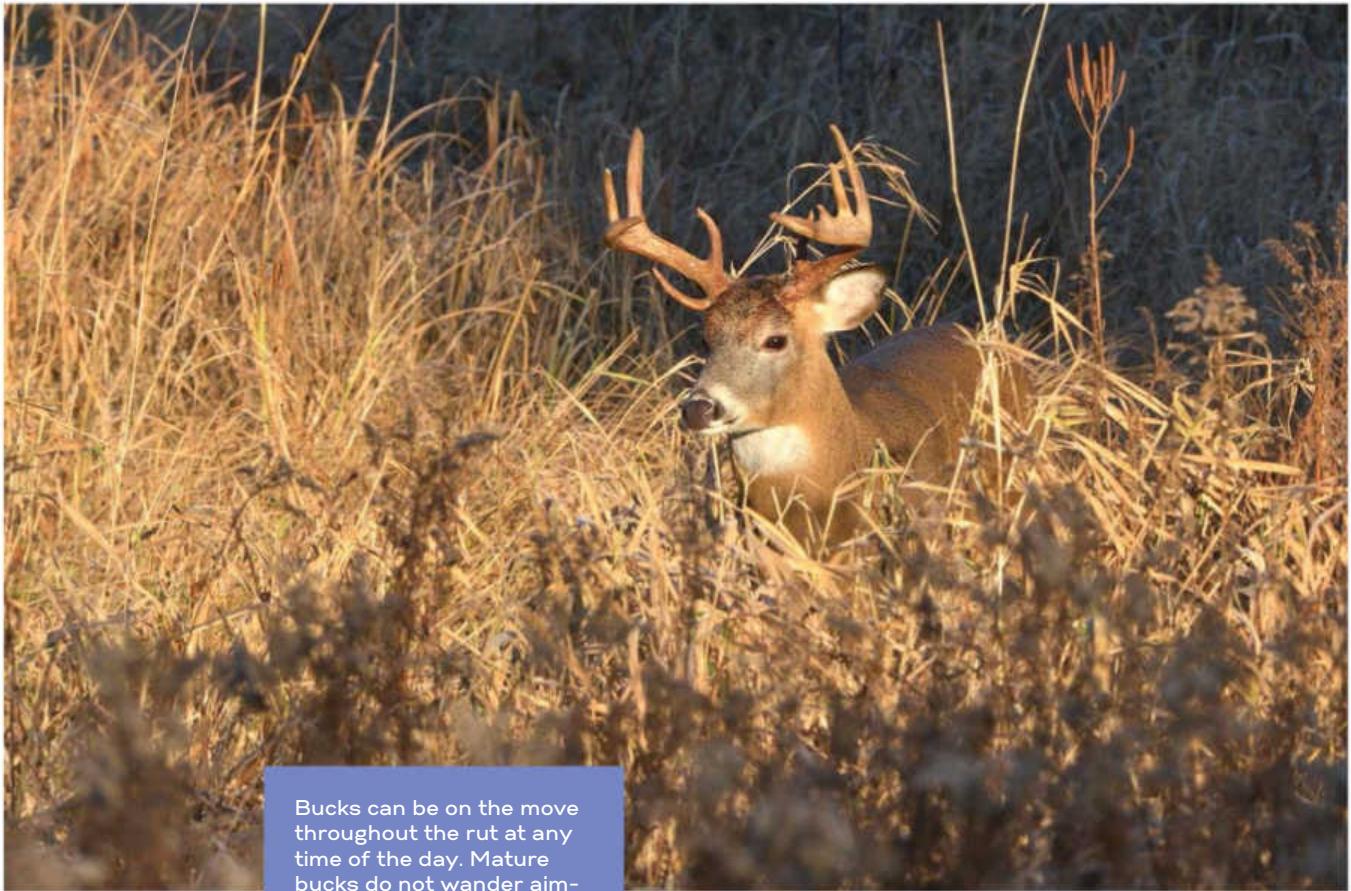
Why would your rut-time hunts revolve around anything other than does? It's really that simple. ■ by Steve Bartylla

At first glance, the stand location didn't appear special. It overlooked the tip of a peninsula of tall grass, and two creeks met nearby. Sure, it had deer sign, but less than many areas of the farm. However, when I started looking closer, it made sense.

About 50 yards to the east, a long, wooded ridge tapered down behind the stand. Does bedded on top, and the sharp sides funneled deer up and down the point. A narrow wooded flat snaked along the creek edge where my stand sat, making for easy north-to-south travel along that sheer-walled ridge. About 150 yards to the northwest, a similar ridge produced the same effect, dumping deer into the peninsula in front of me. And there were more than 100 acres of head-high CRP to the southwest, serving as chasing and bedding grounds.

Finally, the banks of the creeks were very sharp and deep, creating a challenging obstacle. To get between the CRP field and either ridge, deer travelled through the peninsula, using the crossing on the larger creek 40 yards in front of the stand. Traffic to and from the eastern ridge crossed 20 yards down the smaller creek, where I sat.

How to catch a cruising Buck



The more I added it up, I realized my first glance had been wrong. The area seemed to lack an obvious pinch point, but closer inspection revealed that wasn't true. It served as an intersection connecting three distinct doe bedding areas.

One early November morning revealed just how effective that type of a setup can be. At first light, a group of five bucks chased an estrous doe through the peninsula and down the eastern side of the smaller creek. Like tossing chum into a school of piranhas, that sparked a feeding frenzy of buck activity.

Attracted by the sounds of the chase, bucks seemed to emerge from every direction, further whipped into a fever pitch from the estrous odors saturating the area. No doe was safe from being chased. At least 14 bucks passed within bow range by 9 a.m., most several times. It was incredible.

Just as the action waned, I spotted another buck approaching. He was one of the oldest bucks I'd ever seen, but his headgear fell short of what I was after. It wasn't until he turned his head that I recognized him. Though he'd gone downhill hard, I had no doubt he was the mid-160s buck I'd wounded at that farm three seasons before.

Bucks can be on the move throughout the rut at any time of the day. Mature bucks do not wander aimlessly though – choose doe bedding areas and their travel routes for high-odds stands.

Knowing I had to correct my mistake, I came to full draw and told myself to slow things down. My pin settled, and I sent the arrow crashing home. Just like that, an amazing Illinois rut hunt had come to a close.

Many folks struggle when hunting the rut. It can be an extremely chaotic time — or flat-out dead. The day I killed that buck, I'd exchanged texts with a friend who was hunting his Illinois lease. He said the woods were dead and that it was too hot for bucks to move — just as I was experiencing unbelievable action.

No matter your approach to hunting the rut, you will experience some off days. However, if you approach it correctly, you might think you're drowning in bucks more days than not.

Grasping the Basics

What are bucks seeking during the rut? Almost everyone knows the answer. Sure, bucks will feed and drink during the rut, but they are primarily after does. So why would your rut hunts focus on anything other than does? It's really that simple.

If you break it down, you'll likely find that most bucks you've taken during the rut revolved around does.

During slug gun season a few years back, I filled my second Illinois buck tag by rattling in a great buck. That might seem to be related to dominance more than does, but I'll bet my last dollar that deer was hoping to collect the doe the phantom bucks were fighting about. Of course, that's a safer bet because I had a standing buck and bedded doe decoy out.

A Wisconsin buck I killed in 2011 was cruising for does when I arrowed him by a pond. I arrowed another buck during the rut as he followed a doe, and killed another at a funnel between two doe bedding areas. As I think about rutting buck after rutting buck, every deer's downfall was somehow related to does.

Hunting Food and Water

Just because food and water aren't No. 1 on a buck's priority list doesn't mean hunters should ignore them. We just need to adjust our strategies.

Consider the Illinois buck I rattled in. During the early season, I'd bowhunted that area hard. A huge 9-pointer had been coming out in the back corners of a field, so that's where I sat. I came close repeatedly but didn't connect. Still, I noticed the surplus of does that fed where the small bean field opened up into a huge corn field.

On my return trip during the rut,

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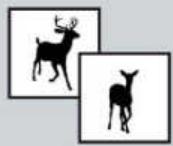
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that's where I headed with my slug gun. Hunting with Sugar Creek Outfitters, I was the only person on the farm and knew I'd be safe using decoys there. I set a tending buck over a bedded doe, just out from where the hidden beans met the corn, so deer could see them from great distances. The scene of several bucks chasing does around the decoy pair and the sound of rattling antlers was just too much for the buck to resist — so much that I pulled him in from more than 800 yards away.

When hunting food during the rut, you still need to hunt where the does are. If I had set up in the corners where the big 9-pointer was coming out earlier in season, I never would have killed that buck.

Water holes are slightly different. I've found that water sources near doe bedding areas are far superior to other water holes does frequent. They draw from two potential paths to success.

The first applies to any water hole frequented by does. Mature bucks realize that water holes are potential hook-up locations, so they tend to cruise past them while searching. Wind direction plays such a strong role in checking does, so a downwind-side setup typically works best. The added bonus is that bucks will actively check nearby doe bedding areas.

Remember, during the rut bucks are wearing their winter coats, and their activity levels are at an annual high. Though food and water might not be their primary motivation, you can bet cruising bucks are as thirsty as a marathon runner well into a race.



The author took this 9.5-year-old buck in a funnel at the same farm he had wounded him three years before.

Also, deer breed many times during a condensed period. Bucks expend a lot of energy and can work up a thirst.

Setups near doe bedding areas can take advantage of that, too.

I cashed in on that a few years ago. I had set up where several points converged by a deep pool in an otherwise dry creek. Does bedded heavily on the apexes of the points above.

I didn't wait too long before I saw a triple-beamed monster pushing a doe down the point. The buck was worn

out, panting heavily with his tongue hanging out.

Three quarters down the point, the doe tried skipping the cut and heading up another point. With thirst apparently ruling the moment, the buck flanked and gouged her harshly in the side, pushing her back toward the water. Just before he began drinking, my arrow was in flight. The huge buck's need to rehydrate had let me tag him. Water sources near doe bedding areas can be fantastic places to catch rutting bucks.

Doe Bedding Areas: Where It's At

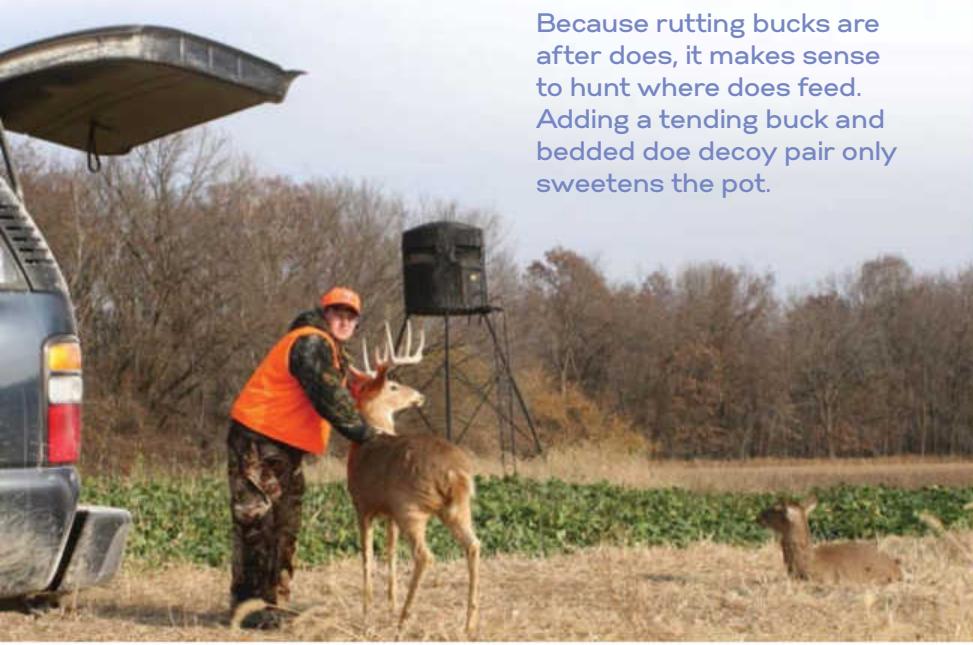
Doe bedding areas can't be over-hyped. During daylight, the best way for mature bucks to find receptive does is to go from bedding area to bedding area. That's where most of the does are during that time.

The reason I keep referring to mature bucks rather than bucks in general is that mature bucks act differently from immature bucks. Youngsters don't know what they're doing, and it shows in their pursuit of does. Conversely, Mr. Big knows exactly what he's doing and balances minimizing energy expenditures with maximizing the odds of finding his target.

You can see this when comparing how mature and immature bucks check doe bedding areas. The youngsters learn that doe bedding areas are where the action is, but they haven't yet determined how to best check them. They commonly go blowing in, randomly chasing any doe they find.

Conversely, Mr. Big has learned that one pass on the downwind side

Because rutting bucks are after does, it makes sense to hunt where does feed. Adding a tending buck and bedded doe decoy pair only sweetens the pot.



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tells him everything he needs to know. That approach minimizes wasted efforts and maximizes results.

Therefore, doe bedding areas with defined edges offer great setups on the downwind side. Small thickets, wetlands and CRP fields that hold does and have defined edges can produce dynamite action. Stands on the downwind edge of thicket bedding areas have produced many of my rutting bucks, including one that took many years to unseat as my personal best.

There often isn't a defined trail for scent-checking bucks, leaving you wondering where to place your stand. I've learned that about 20 yards off the prevailing downwind edge is about right. That placement allows for shots at bucks cruising the edge and out to 40 yards. When paired with the best trail accessing the cover, that's a great setup.

Doe bedding areas are also good spots to pull out scents. Bucks are already fixated on scenting estrous does, so they're much more likely to fall for the lie being sold by a top-end estrous scent.

One productive strategy is to place two scent wicks about 30 yards apart near the edge of the bedding area. Orient them so an imaginary line between the stand and wicks create a triangle. That can be a big help in stopping and positioning a buck for a shot. It also helps attract bucks that are downwind of your setup, cutting them off before they can wind you.

Unfortunately, not all doe bedding areas allow for such setups. Many are generalized areas or high ground not suitable for scent checking. In either case, you can set up in the middle of the action. It's risky, but I've pulled that off on a couple of great bucks. However, you'd better beat the deer into the area, take odor control to

the maximum and be prepared for an all-day sit. Even then, hunting such setups more than once or twice a season typically ruins them.

Another option is hunting the best access to these areas. In some situations, topography or well-defined travel patterns make this a very successful approach.

Still, the best setups are funnels that separate two or more doe bedding areas. To find the ones that don't stick out, plot on a map where does typically bed, and determine the best routes between them. Doing so can uncover hidden funnels, such as the one in the scenario at the beginning of this article.

Conclusion

Hunting does during the rut isn't ground-breaking, but many of the best hunting methods aren't. Most hunters realize that but still fall into the trap of hunting stands that have nothing to do with does during the rut. After all, they've seen bucks at other areas. When the rut hits, throw that out the window. The bucks have. Their primary concern is does. Make it yours, too.

— Steve Bartylla is one of North America's top deer hunters and private-land deer managers. Contact him at bowwriter@yahoo.com.



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Doe bedding areas can't be overhyped. During daylight, the best way for mature bucks to find receptive does is to go from bedding to bedding area.

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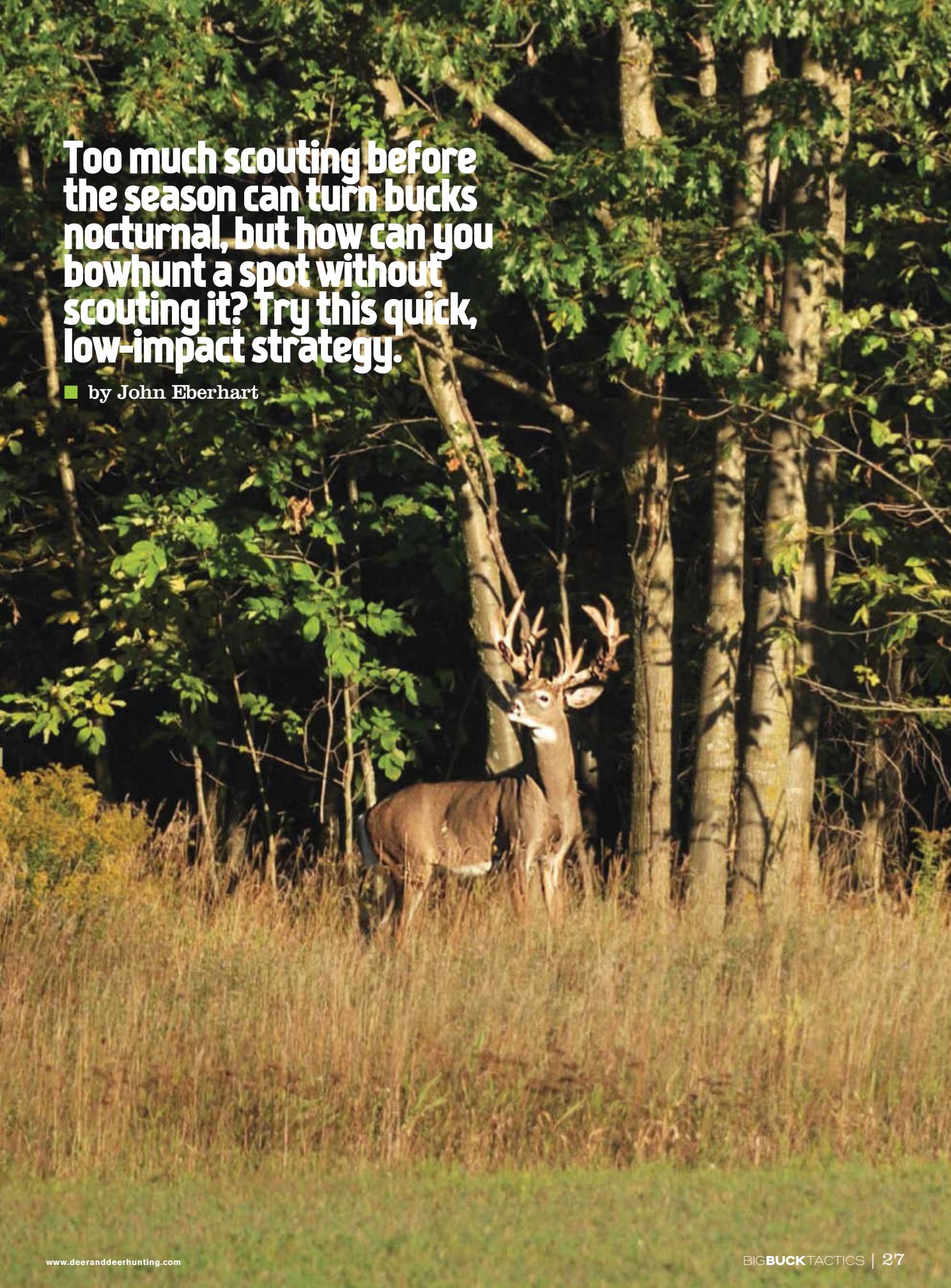


Pre-season Speed Hunting

How many times have you seen or heard of a nice buck that consistently feeds at the same location every evening during summer only to disappear just before the season? In areas that see a lot of heavy hunting pressure, that vanishing act happens far more frequently than not. Unknowingly, many hunters create the situation with overzealous pre-season scouting and location preparation.

By traipsing through the woods, busting through brush, hanging stands, clearing shooting lanes and marking entry and exit routes just before the season, hunters let mature bucks know it's time to alter their vulnerable summer habits to elude these intruders.

I consider heavy consequential hunting pressure areas — or HCHPs — those places where bowhunter densities exceed 10 per square mile and gun-hunter densities are double that on opening day, and where almost every one of those hunters targets any legal antlered buck. In such spots, many hunters believe if they pass a buck, it will get killed by the neighbors after it crosses the fence.

A large buck deer stands in a grassy field, facing right. It is positioned near a dense line of trees and shrubs. The scene is bathed in bright sunlight, creating strong shadows and highlights on the deer's coat and the surrounding foliage.

Too much scouting before the season can turn bucks nocturnal, but how can you bowhunt a spot without scouting it? Try this quick, low-impact strategy.

■ by John Eberhart

In these areas, bucks of all age groups must learn quickly how to avoid hunters. Few bucks survive beyond 2½ years, and those that do likely have suffered consequences from previous hunter encounters and carry old wounds.

Deer can't differentiate between scouting and hunting, and after a winter, spring and summer of being left alone, they view the sudden influx of human activity in their core area as an immediate threat. They react by assuming more nocturnal movement behavior. When hunting for mature bucks in HCHP areas, improper pre-season scouting can ruin any chance of success before the rut.

Even something as benign as hanging a motion camera can have catastrophic results on an area's potential. Deer don't know you just want to take their picture. Your intrusion is a threat to their existence.

An HCHP area should not be confused with heavily hunted areas that have hunter engagement criteria or rules. In such spots — large managed areas or on pay-to-hunt ranches with specific age or antler criteria rules — there are no consequences for daytime activity by bucks until they reach the kill criteria. Therefore, numerous hunters represent

only a human presence, not a threat to a buck as it grows to maturity. In such areas, when a buck meets the kill criteria, his lack of fear from previous non-consequential hunter encounters makes him extremely vulnerable and relatively easy to hunt and kill.

But how can you hunt without scouting? Here's how I do it.

Post-Season Prep

I conduct more than 80 percent of my scouting and tree preparation after the season. Why? Before spring green-up, I can molest any property without concern of spooking deer, and I find sign from the previous rut, such as rubs, ground scrapes, licking branches and rut traffic areas. More than 55 percent of record-book bucks are taken during the brief rut phases, so sign from the previous rut is primarily what I search for and set up on.

During my post-season scouting ventures, I also search for early season hunting locations. All early season deer activity revolves around food sources, so that's what I look for.

The common practice of hunting along short crop-field edges for mature bucks doesn't cut it. Anyone who consistently takes mature bucks along perimeters of open crop edges is

not hunting HCHP property.

Unless I know a field will be in standing corn, I eliminate crop-field edges from my list of potential locations. Standing corn offers food and security cover. If the sign warrants it and there's adequate transition cover to the area, I will set up along the perimeters of standing corn. When the corn is cut, I abandon those sites until the next time they're in standing corn.

My ideal early season locations are destination feeding sites with perimeter and transition security cover to them from bedding areas. These include apple or pear trees, solitary white oaks in a sea of other types of trees, and red oaks if there are no white oaks. Fruit or mast trees should not be in a sea of similar trees. If they are, that location is not a destination site.

You can easily identify white oaks by the rounded lobes on their leaves and rough bark that extends all the way up the tree and out to the branches. Red oaks have smooth bark and pointed leaf lobes. Red and white oak acorns differ in flavor because of bitter tannins. Next fall, pick up one of each and chew them. You will immediately know why deer gravitate to white oaks.

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Mature bucks will change their daily habits after an influx of early season activity on highly pressured land. Speed touring a previously scouted area allows you to quickly set up where bucks have shifted their patterns.



I prepare all trees, shooting lanes and entry and exit routes during the post-season, with no idea if the trees will offer food the next fall. That's where pre-season speed touring comes into play. I call it speed touring because that's what it is. I'm not scouting for new hunting locations. I'm just rapidly touring through previously prepared fruit and mast tree locations during midday to see if they offer food and current buck activity. I've been pre-season speed touring for at least 25 of my 46 seasons but have always lumped it in with the standard term: pre-season scouting.

Taking a Speed Tour

Speed touring should always be done during midday, when most deer are bedded, and — if possible — during inclement weather, such as a hard rain or windy conditions, which will help mask noise and dissipate human odor.

Unlike states with September archery openers, Michigan's season — where I do most of my hunting — opens October 1, so I wait until mid-September to speed tour my pre-set locations. Mature bucks across the upper Midwest typically shed their velvet by the first week of September, which lets me confirm fresh buck activity leading to or at my sites.

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By mid- to late-September, if isolated fruit and mast trees are dropping food, they will usually have fresh buck sign nearby. This usually includes rubs, scrapes, rub lines leading to a tree or large droppings under trees. If I don't find buck sign near trees that are dropping food, I note it and continue touring my sites before making early season hunting plans.

When a location has adequate sign, I have work to do. I immediately clear the tree and shooting lanes of new summer growth that might impede a shot. Because I prepared the spot before summer, the re-preparation time is minimal. I never come back another day to re-prep a location, because that would defeat the purpose of one low-impact intrusion.

Other than on public land — where I usually have to access my sites with waders, hip boots, a canoe or crawling on my hands and knees through brush to get away from other hunters — speed touring takes very little time per parcel because I've already identified stand locations.

After I've toured my early season locations and prepared the spots with food and sign, I form a plan of attack for the order I'll hunt them. This takes into account which sites have mature buck sign, which are best suited for mornings or evenings, and which are best for a mature buck to transition to and feel comfortable during daylight.

The most critical question is which locations are in areas where pre-season scouting ventures from other hunters have the least impact on a buck I might pursue. As mentioned, in most areas I hunt, mature bucks (3½ and older) turn nocturnal before the season because of intrusive pre-season scouting by other hunters in their core areas.

Examples: Other than public land, I currently have four parcels to hunt. I share 400 acres with three other hunters. About 260 acres of it is groomed crop fields, and the remaining 140 is mature timber devoid of any understory in which a mature buck might bed. When there's a mature buck in the area, he won't bed on the property unless it's in standing corn. For Michigan, 400 acres is a monstrous property, yet this parcel is not well suited for daytime mature buck activity. Why? Even though a mature buck might use the property, he beds on neighboring property and turns nocturnal because of the neighbors' intrusive pre-season scouting.

Although I have a couple of locations prepared at isolated apple trees

By keeping tabs on the areas that other hunters are pressuring and the sign where bucks escape that pressure, the author consistently has opportunities at mature bucks.



and white oaks, I don't hunt that parcel early in the season. However, it can be productive for daytime mature buck activity during the rut, when mature bucks are pursuing does.

Another piece is 20 acres, and I share it with three other bowhunters. Although the parcel is small, it has a dense 7-acre bedding area we have

agreed to stay out of. This is the densest bedding area in the section, and it always seems to hold a mature buck. There's one secluded apple tree on the property, with transition cover to the bedding area. Because I found it first, I have dibs on it, and the other hunters stay away. We're all on board with post-season tree preparation, and

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Take note of fresh scrapes, rubs and droppings near isolated fruit and mast trees on pressured land. These are great spots to key in on as soon as the conditions are right.

before the season, we tidy our locations on the same day, trying to stay as scent-free as possible. Then we hunt with extreme moderation.

Because our pre-season speed cleanup doesn't interfere with where the mature buck beds, we're not altering his behavior. Two of us have been very successful at taking mature bucks on this parcel, but only I have had success during the first few days of season at the isolated apple tree. A parcel's size is never a prerequisite for its quality.

At a public location I've hunted for years, I have to crawl about 100 yards through tunnels under a canopy of autumn olive bushes to access a couple of isolated apple trees. If the trees have apples, I'll put it in my early season rotation. The spot also heats up later in the season as public-land hunters push deer back into the dense area.

Putting the Program Together

Let's put speed touring for early season locations into perspective.

Through years, I have lost permission and gained new permission more than I care to discuss, but I'm aware that goes with the territory in HCHP areas. Still, every year by the end of April, I have at least 40 spots prepared for the upcoming season, most of which have been set up for years. On average, about half of the sites are at potential early season locations because they fit the destination food criteria or are on routes from bedding areas to feeding locations.

When I speed tour, I require specific tools for location touch-up. The most important is scent-free clothing. It's almost impossible to completely mask the noise of a physical intrusion. However, your tour can be as scent-free as possible if you wear an activated carbon suit, gloves, cap, clean rubber boots and a clean pack.

The arsenal of scouting tools required for speed touring is minimal because you'll only be cleaning up new summer growth and possibly reflective-tacking some more trees along entry and exit routes. I take a compass, reflective tacks, a climbing harness, a 14-foot extension saw, a sheathed long-bladed camp saw, six tree steps — I remove the bottom six steps from most of my trees after post-season preparation — and, depending on how well I know the property, an

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For more info on the PlotWatcher Pro, visit: day6outdoors.com/products/plotwatcher-pro.

— Alan Clemons



aerial map.

If you must scout a new piece of property, you have no alternative but to be intrusive and alter deer traffic. But most of you likely have locations you've hunted for years. During one midday visit, try speed touring your locations for a couple of early season sites and don't return until opening day. In HCHP areas, taking a mature buck is extremely difficult, but some seasons, speed touring might give you an additional opportunity.

— John Eberhart is an accomplished big-buck bowhunter from Michigan. He specializes in heavy consequential hunting pressure areas. You can learn more about his tactics through his instructional books and DVDs at www.deerjohn.net



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When bowhunting mature bucks, it's important to place stands in high-odds areas. With few exceptions, that means setting up in preferred travel corridors.

■ by Bob Robb



There are many types of corridors, most of which I classify as funnels. Different types of funnels are most productive at different times of the year and under different conditions. However, one type I have always liked to hunt is the breakline. But you must hunt them only when conditions are best.

The term breakline was used during the 1960s and '70s when anglers talked about catching largemouth bass. Back then, we used the term to define any spot where one terrain type met another and a definable contrast in structure occurred. Bass seem to use breaklines to hang out and wait for baitfish to swim by. The fish also follow breaklines as they make their daily trips from resting to feeding areas. Because bass spend a lot of time on breaklines, these areas are great places to catch fish.

I've found the same thing happens when I'm bowhunting whitetails. Mature bucks like to travel along breaklines. Why? In many cases, these transition areas are places where the cover smoothes out, making walking easy. On one side, bucks find lots of good food; on the other side, there is thick, heavy escape cover that can be accessed in a bound or two.

There are many examples of breaklines. One I like to hunt involves cut-overs. These include timber planted specifically to be harvested; private land that has been partially logged; and even areas where big storms knocked down a portion of the timber or where fire has ravaged one spot but spared adjacent timber.

The area that is blown down or cut over soon forms a brushy jungle of stumps, old limbs and new growth — the ideal place for deer to hide and bed.

Meanwhile, these deer often use the breakline — that small area between the blow down or cut-over and the standing timber — when they travel, often in ways an intelligent deer hunter can predict.

FIND BIGGER JCKS ON THE BREAKLINES

Breakline 101

Most areas where large tracts of timber are planted for harvest — the Deep South's pine forests come to mind — are located on relatively flat ground. That is advantageous to hunters because it results in predictable wind patterns. On level terrain, wind currents don't bounce around like they do in hill country, and they don't eddy back and forth like they do in valleys and deep ravines. Also, when loggers cut the timber, they often do so via grids, creating long, straight edges, which makes it easier to select stand sites.

Picture a large, rectangular section of standing timber, with the long sides running north to south. To the south and west is a large cow pasture. To the east is a cornfield. To the north is another crop, maybe soybeans. However, separating the planted crops from the trees and pasture is a barbed wire fence. Although the open woods has mostly mature trees, many of them are productive oaks.

The abundance of acorns, added to the adjacent crop fields, is almost

reason enough to hunt inside this woodlot. Yet, there's more. At the north end of the lot is a section of cut-over timber. This area was logged years ago, and it's now a thick jungle of stumps, limbs, briars and brush. The fact it also holds several varieties of succulent browse makes it even more attractive.

In such scenarios, there's usually a narrow corridor separating the standing woods from the cut-over. It could be an old road used by loggers, but it might be a small ridge or even a creek channel. You can bet your bottom dollar that along this corridor will be a serious deer trail. Off of this trail will be several interior trails that generally head to and from the bedding thicket.

Consider these trails as narrow streams of life winding their way in and out of the habitat. Often, the trails that are most heavily used are found near the center of the breakline. You'll also find the best deer sign here, including rub lines and old scrapes.

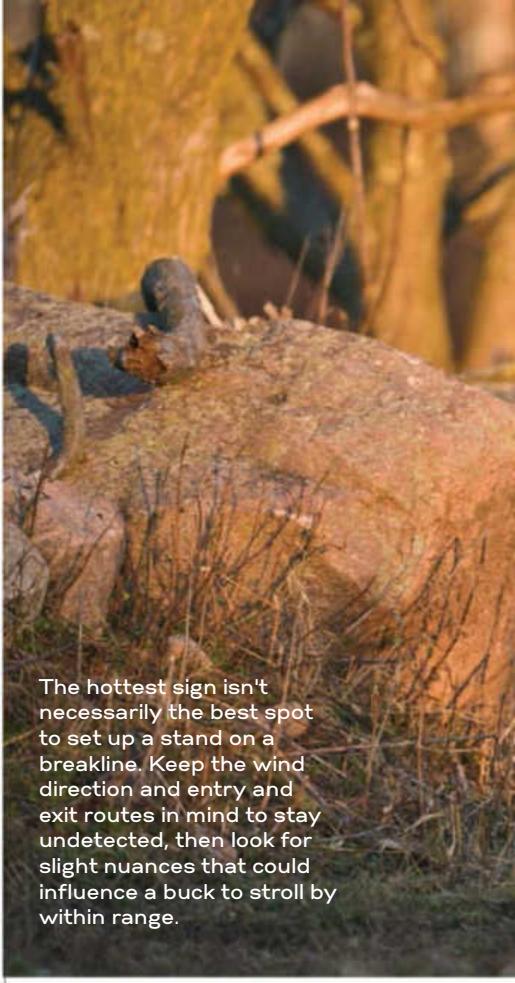
At first glance, choosing a stand setup here is simple. You find the best sign — again, typically along one or more of the deer trails that bisect the breakline trail — and hang enough stands so you can hunt it in virtually any wind condition.

There lies the catch. Although such a strategy might pay off, it can also be a sucker's play.

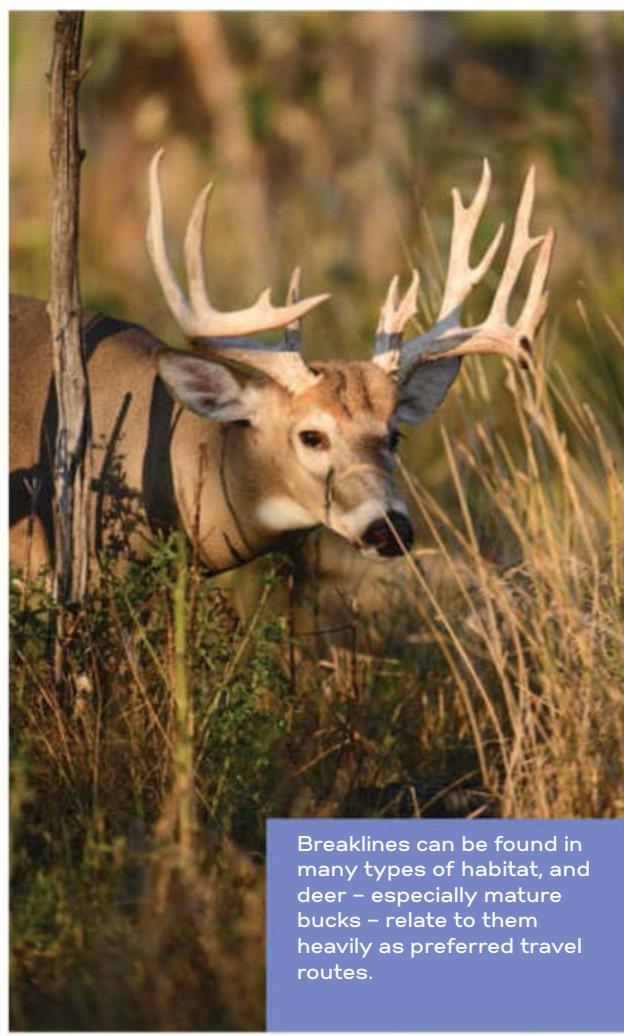
The Best Stand Site?

The troubles with this stand location are many. First and foremost, you'll have to access your stand by walking through a large portion of the woodlot. No matter how careful you are, you are bound to leave some scent along the way.

Furthermore, you will more than likely make enough noise to be heard, and perhaps seen, by one or more deer as you walk in. None of this considers the difficulty of leaving the stand undetected. And then there's the



The hottest sign isn't necessarily the best spot to set up a stand on a breakline. Keep the wind direction and entry and exit routes in mind to stay undetected, then look for slight nuances that could influence a buck to stroll by within range.



Breaklines can be found in many types of habitat, and deer — especially mature bucks — relate to them heavily as preferred travel routes.

wind. Even if it is blowing from the north or the south, much of your scent will waft into the bedding area or the woodlot — areas where you expect the deer to be coming from, depending on the time of day.

For all these reasons, I have learned the hard way that the best place to hunt in such scenarios is on the downwind corner of the woods and the breakline.

Going back to the example, on the north end of the structure is the cut-over bedding thicket; to the south is the standing timber. The breakline (the old logging road) runs west to east, with the heavily used breakline trail running along the old road on the north side. When the wind is blowing from the west/southwest, as it often does where I hunt, the best place to hang a stand is at the downwind corner of the woods and breakline. In this case, that would be on the eastern edge of the thicket, just north of the breakline trail.

This is the smart play for hunters trying to take a mature buck. First and foremost, the wind is right. By setting the stand near the edge of the woods or bedding thicket — whichever side of the breakline trail offers the best location — the chance of getting winded is almost zero because the deer usually travel just inside the

When to Attack

Although I prefer hunting breakline edges, I will occasionally attack the interior cover. This occurs when the wind is perfect; I can enter and exit the cover with minimal chances of being detected; and when I have observed patternable deer movement from my stand.

For example, during a hunt in North Texas, I was set up along a cottonwood bottom separated by winter wheat fields and hilly, wooded bedding areas. I watched three mature bucks emerge from the bedding area and head for a wheat field about 150 yards from my stand two evenings in a row. Swirling winds prevented me from moving those first few days, but the weather patterns calmed down by the fourth day of my hunt. It was time to get my game on.

At about noon on the fourth day, I slipped into the cover toting my bow, a portable stand and high hopes. I moved as quickly and quietly as possible and, before long, was set up overlooking a transition area not far from the bucks' field entrance.

It was five hours until prime time, and had I not packed a paperback thriller to help me pass the time, I would have been bored out of my skull. The long wait was well worth it. Sure enough, about 15 minutes before shooting light expired, I was rewarded when a 140-inch 8-pointer strolled into bow range.

Rules, as they say, are made to be broken. This rings especially true when hunting breaklines under ideal conditions.

— Bob Robb



woods and not in the open pasture or cut crop field. Second, you can access the stand by walking across the pasture, an area deer — especially mature bucks — do not normally spend much time in. The access and egress routes to the stand also do not affect the thicker cover areas, which is another huge advantage.

This stand location will go against the common tactic of finding the hottest sign and hunting it immediately. I will admit that setting a stand on the edge of thick cover and away from hot sign is hard on the nerves. It gets worse when you see deer after deer moving through the middle of the cover well out of bow range.

However, in this game of cat and mouse, patience and persistence are everything. You have to be patient enough to only hunt this spot when the wind is right and not get sucked into the trap of moving just because the first day — or three — passes without action near your tree.

"Are you nuts?" you might ask. "The deer are over there, and I am over here!"

Take a breath. Calm down and don't give up. Here's why.

A mature buck is your goal, and that means hunting him with a minimum of human intrusion. Staying out of the center of things does that.

When that big deer begins using

the area, he will usually do so in an erratic manner. By this I mean not using the same trail every time. This is especially true during the pre-rut and rut, when such setups are most productive.

When mature bucks begin trolling for does, they do so willy nilly, weaving in and out of the best areas, scent-checking scrapes and trails. They might even freshen scrapes and rubs along the main breakline trail. If you're patient, the buck will — sooner or later — make his rounds and step within range of your tree. All you have to do is be ready to make the shot.

Finding Breakline Hotspots

There's really only one way to find breakline ambush locations, and that's by getting out and walking the land. Topographic maps and aerial photographs show you land contours and other helpful features, but they will not tell you anything about a breakline.

Keep your eyes peeled if you hunt turkeys or shed antlers during spring. On the topographic map you have in your fannypack (you do have one, right?), mark any cut-overs and breakline trails you see. While scouting, look for rub lines and old scrapes. Mark them on the map, too, along

with all deer trails. Before long, you'll pinpoint the breaklines and get an idea of where you need to hunt during fall.

Spend several weeks during late spring and early summer selecting and preparing stand sites and shooting lanes. Make sure each stand site has a quick, easy and quiet walking route — even if that means you need to bring a garden rake or leaf blower with you when prepping the site. The work you do during spring will help you get the drop on a gagger buck next fall.

— Bob Robb is one of North America's most successful bowhunters. He hails from Arizona.





Can you count on seeing the same trophy buck twice? Not often. Here's why.

■ by John Trout Jr.

Every deer hunter knows what it's like to sit on stand and see a big buck slip by unscathed. You know how it works: Perhaps the deer walked by just out of bow range. Maybe he scented you moments before a shooting opportunity. The list goes on.

The reason we fail to capitalize might be important, but the reality is what we feel. The pain begins when we see the huge deer fade from view. The possibility of killing the buck — the hopes, dreams and opportunity — has vanished. Yet a missed occasion typically inspires us to try again. If we have more days to hunt, there might be a possibility for a second opportunity. Or is there? What's the chance you might encounter the buck again?

Before continuing, let's define parameters. Second opportunities apply to big bucks you see while hunting. What you see on trail cameras or while driving does not pertain. That's not to say scouting endeavors aren't beneficial. They are. However, this story is about the actual hunt — failing to capitalize the first time you see a mature buck walk by, the possibility you'll get another chance and what affects the likelihood you'll get a second opportunity.

Area Comparisons

Let's consider two scenarios, one of which had a great ending. The other anecdote left a hunter heartbroken and depressed.

The first incident occurred in southern Indiana several years ago. My good friend Ed Rinehart had seen a huge buck up close. The big deer approached slowly, but as Rinehart nervously attempted to draw his bow when the monster walked past, the deer spotted him 15 yards away. You know the heartbreaking end of that story.

Rinehart's brother Al expressed pity but didn't hesitate to tell Rinehart that he would never see that deer again. He was right. Rinehart hunted that stand site and others nearby for the remainder of the season and never saw the huge buck again.



Second Chances

Though rare, some mature bucks can appear multiple times throughout a season. But hunting pressure can have a major influence on how often a buck travels during daylight hours.



One year, while hunting the Illinois archery season, a dandy 8-pointer approached my stand. Facing me at no more than 20 yards, he sensed something wasn't right. Casually, the deer turned around and headed back from where he had come. A few days later, I attempted to grunt in that 8-pointer during the pre-rut. My attempt failed, and the big deer slipped past me no more than 35 yards away. The buck's curled brow tines and symmetrical antlers made him easily identifiable both times.

A week or so later, after my wife, Vikki, had taken a small buck, she sat on stand without a bow just to enjoy a beautiful evening while I hunted a few hundred yards to the south. The 8-pointer walked past her only 10

yards away and only 200 yards from where I had seen him previously.

On the final morning of the archery season, with the rut in high gear, and only one week after Vikki saw the deer, the 8-pointer walked past me only 40 yards away while pursuing a doe. Again, I had no opportunity to shoot the buck. That changed the next day on the first morning of the firearms season. I shot the 8-pointer as he chased the same doe he'd pursued the previous day.

It's certainly uncommon to see the same big buck four times in one season from a treestand. In fact, it's never happened to me before. There have been seasons when I've seen the same big buck two or possibly three times. Moreover, remember some subordinate bucks and certain does and fawns that showed up consistently throughout a hunting season. Most mature bucks, though, seldom make regular appearances.

Then again, perhaps a big buck is often nearby but remains anonymous if there's too much hunting pressure. The area in Indiana where Rinehart

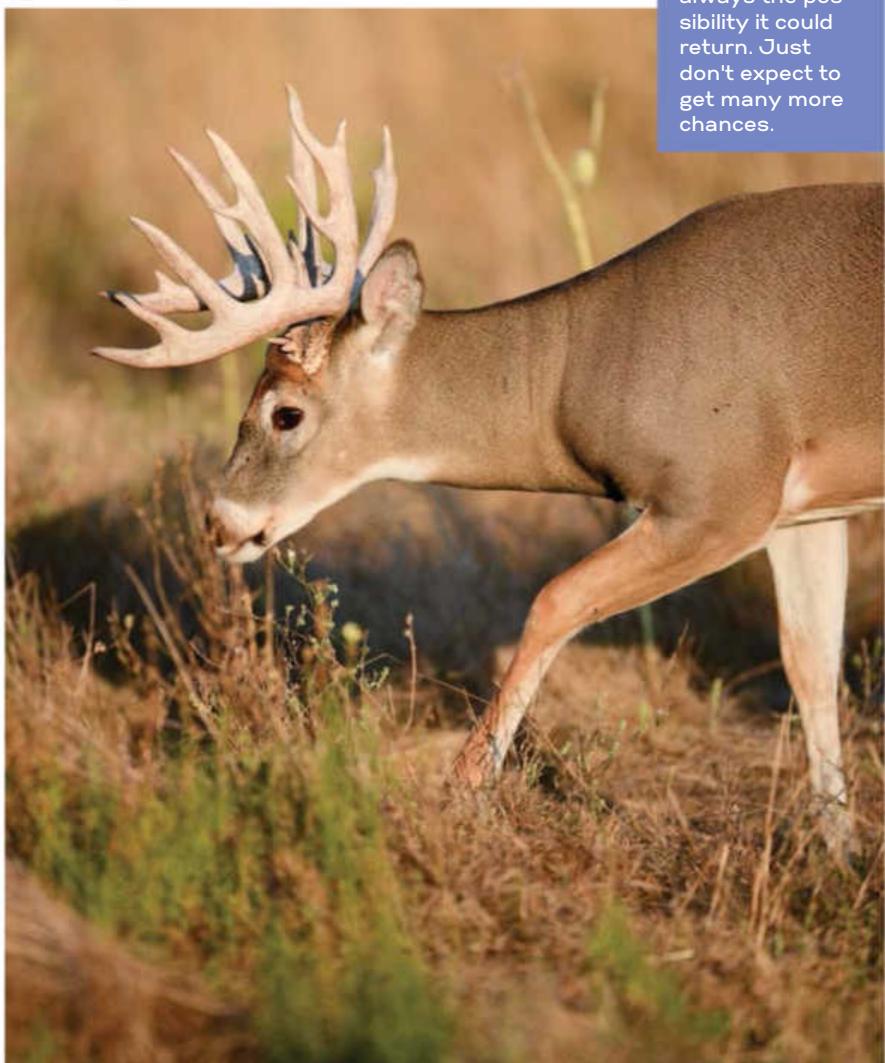
saw the buck once was heavily hunted. The region in Illinois where I hunted receives a fair amount of pressure, but hunting effort there doesn't compare to that in the Indiana location.

Three-Year Saga

Tim Hilsmeye, a landowner and avid bow- and gun-hunter recalled an unusual buck he saw at his farm three consecutive years. Hilsmeye said the buck was easily identifiable because it had an extremely large brow tine and non-symmetrical antler on its left side. The deer sported 8 points but was not on Hilsmeye's hit-list the first two years. He believes in managing the herd and reducing antlerless deer, but he also loves the challenge of killing a trophy whitetail each season.

Hilsmeye passed on the unusual buck the first two seasons, claiming the deer walked

If you miss your first chance at a big buck, don't give up entirely. There was a reason it was in that location and there's always the possibility it could return. Just don't expect to get many more chances.



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past his stand numerous times during archery season. This past year, however, the unique buck's antlers were estimated at about 140 inches. Hilsmeyer hoped he would see the deer again — in bow range.

Hilsmeyer saw the bizarre buck twice during the pre-rut, but each time it failed to walk into bow range. In the weeks that followed, he didn't see the deer again. The rut came and went, and Hilsmeyer wondered if the deer had survived the firearms season. After all, the deer had made it through the two previous seasons.

That did not happen a third time. Hilsmeyer discovered the nontypical had been shot during Indiana's black-powder season on a neighboring property, only ¼-mile from where he often hunted.

Although Hilsmeyer had seen the buck consistently for three years, he noticed this past season that the buck had become nearly nocturnal. The only sightings occurred at dawn and dusk. Hilsmeyer speculated that as hunting pressure increased, sightings of the big buck diminished. However, it's obvious the unique deer had remained hidden and not left the area.

Influence of Hunting Pressure

I won't deny that hunting pressure might determine whether you

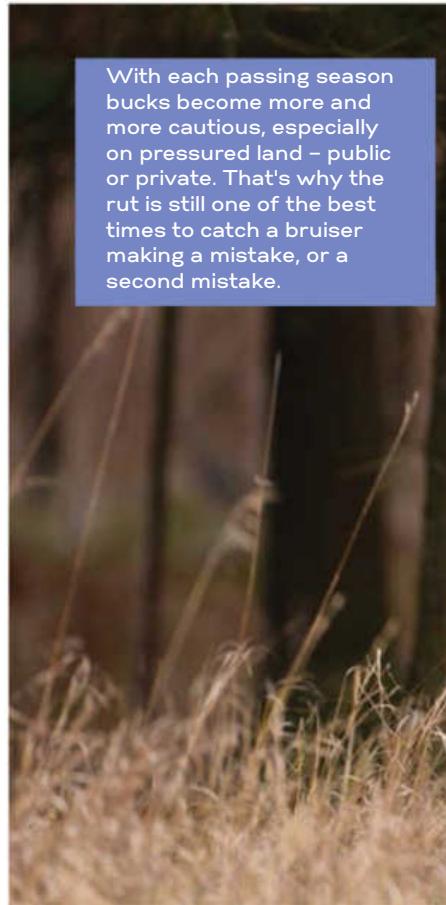
get a second opportunity at a trophy whitetail. Nor will I deny that hunting public land might decrease the chances further.

The breeding season is often our ace in the hole because it brings the big boys out of hiding. In fact, on public land, it's often the only hope of getting a second opportunity if you failed the first time with a mature buck. During the rut, our mistakes don't always cost us. Bucks make the errors. Even then, though, extensive hunting pressure typically leads to a seemingly brief breeding season. Bucks quickly catch on and disappear.

That's not to say you couldn't experience the same results on heavily hunted private land. I remember hunting an area that was overcrowded and probably hunted more than many public areas. I saw an occasional big buck but never more than once. If you didn't get him the first time, the game was finished.

Although you shouldn't count on seeing the same trophy whitetail more than once in areas with extensive hunting pressure, that doesn't mean those deer aren't there. On the contrary, folks often find huge sheds in such areas and occasionally kill a super buck. That reinforces the huge role hunting pressure plays in getting a second opportunity.

With each passing season bucks become more and more cautious, especially on pressured land – public or private. That's why the rut is still one of the best times to catch a bruiser making a mistake, or a second mistake.



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Nocturnal or Gone?

Although it's anyone's guess why you might fail to see a big buck twice, you can narrow down the possibilities.

Obviously, there's always a chance that another hunter killed the trophy whitetail you saw. That eliminates any possibility you would see him again. That possibility always exists, but it's more likely the deer is alive.

That leaves only two additional options: The buck has left the area or become nocturnal.

First, let's consider the chance that the buck vacated the area and why that might have occurred. When breeding begins, bucks often venture farther in pursuit of does. Sometimes, it's competition. Smaller bucks often leave an area simply because bigger bucks don't allow them to stay. And it's possible the big buck you saw might not be the biggest in the area.

As for bucks becoming nocturnal, I've never really believed that any deer will totally rely on moving only during darkness. However, I believe hunting pressure will make them move into bedding areas early in the morning and keep them in seclusion until just before dusk. That might change as the breeding season approaches.

It's unlikely you will know with certainty that a big buck has left the area. If you fail to see him one day, you hope it will change the next. Sometimes, a trophy buck hasn't left the area or became nocturnal. Often, he's just around the corner or perhaps over the hill. That is, he's in the right spot, and you're in the wrong spot.

— John Trout Jr.

Mature Bucks Learn Fast

One question remains: Is it possible that mature bucks — those that have been around the block a few times — learn fast? If we make a serious mistake, do they pick up on it and make certain we won't see them again?

According to Hilsmeyer, that's exactly what happens. In fact, the weird buck he saw several times became an exception to that rule. Hilsmeyer said second opportunities at trophy whitetails are rare.

"Usually, something goes wrong," he said. "The big boys seem to know when they are being hunted. Sometimes, it takes only one mistake to make sure you won't ever see a big buck again."

Hilsmeyer added that there's a long list of things that can go wrong and a long litany of blunders hunters can make. He said wind is always a major factor and that you must always hunt smart. If the wind is wrong for an ambush site, you must force yourself to hunt another location, no matter how good or tempting the best spot appears.

I remember a huge buck that scented me the first time I saw him. The deer didn't bolt as some do, but instead turned and sneaked out of the area as quietly as he came in. I never saw the deer again. More than likely,

you have experienced that consequence — probably more than once. However, those are the deer we never forget.

Hilsmeyer said the only way we can prevent an error that negates a second opportunity is to stay home. In other words, it's not preventable. If you hunt a big buck and spend time in the woods, you're probably your worst enemy. However, because that's the chance we have to take, Hilsmeyer suggested you put the most thought into how you travel to and from your stands.

"I think the best prevention is to be in your hunting area only when you are going to hunt it," he said. "Do your scouting, and set up stands before the hunting season, when big bucks are spending time in their home range."

When it comes time to move a stand during the season, and while walking in and out of a hunting area, take every possible precaution and keep a low profile. The possibility of remaining undetected is remote, but it might tip the odds in your favor of getting another chance at a trophy whitetail.

Conclusion

Through the years, I've seen a few second opportunities. More often than not, though, they seldom occur. I don't believe you should fret about missing a first opportunity at a big buck.

In reality, seeing a big one the first time becomes the real inspiration for the next time we hunt. Knowing he's there and that we might see him again provides motivation and encouragement for another day.

— The late John Trout Jr. was a long-time D&DH contributor and one of the best bowhunters in North America. He was widely considered to be the foremost authority on tracking and trailing wounded whitetails.





**WHEN THE CHASE IS ON, THE
BEST PLACE TO BE IS WHERE
THOSE CHASES END UP.**

■ by Pat Reeve



When it comes to mature white-tailed bucks, no one knows it all. Big bucks teach you something every day. You're always learning. And just about the time you think you know it all, the deer will throw you for a loop. Big whitetails don't follow a script. That's reality.

However, when you've hunted many rutting seasons, in multiple places each year, you begin to see patterns and start to put that information to work. That's another reality. Certain kinds of spots can increase your chances of crossing paths with a rutting buck. These situations and setups change with each of the three phases of the rut. When bucks are actively pursuing does, you want to set up in the places where the chases end up.

Ridge Points

Steep hill country is hard to hunt. This describes my home hunting grounds, as well as deer woods in many places. Wind is never true in the hills — it swirls and curls and comes from unexpected directions. Bucks use the terrain to their advantage, bedding on ridge points so they can see what they can't smell, and smell what they can't see.

During the rut's chase phase, bucks will push does to the ends of ridges. A doe doesn't want to get caught, but after she reaches the end of the ridge, that's where she has to stay. The buck has her cornered, so this is where the action stacks up. These ridge points are the places to be during the first week of November, or whenever the bucks are chasing where you hunt.

How to nail the chase phase



Pat Reeve honed his big-buck hunting tactics by working as a guide for Buffalo County outfitter Tom Indrebo in the early 1990s. He has since traveled the country in search of monster whitetails.

Remote Areas

Ridge points work so well because they are remote. When a buck gets a hot doe cornered, he wants her to himself. Where there aren't ridge points, bucks will take advantage of the next best thing — the most remote places they can find.

During the chase phase in many places such as Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and others, look for thickets or dense areas full of buckthorn, willow, tag alders or canary grass. Does end up in these odd, far-flung spots as they try to elude bucks. I can't tell you how many times I've seen a secluded grass field or strip of cover around a farm pond become a magnet for bucks chasing does.

Limited Cover

Mature or dominant bucks will peel does away from other deer, and the chase will often lead them into open areas. Examples include along a fence line, or in a little swale that

runs through a harvested grain field, hay field or pasture. These might seem like strange places to set up, but these out-of-the-way spots offer their own kind of remoteness. These are the kinds of areas where a doe will end up after being chased.

The Lockdown Phase

It can be frustrating to hunt when the bucks are locked down with does. A buck isn't cruising or covering ground, so you're not going to see him, and he is going to stay with that doe until he breeds her. She is becoming receptive, and they're just biding time until the time is right. Your odds have dramatically decreased. Hunters talk about the rut all fall and wait with high anticipation, but this phase can be a very frustrating time to hunt.

Some guys will take nice bucks, but the biggest bucks are with does. The animals getting shot are often the subdominant deer that are still on the search.

Scrape Areas

Now, a lonely buck will visit scrapes. The does are ready to breed, and any buck that's not hooked up still has an intense urge to find companionship. The best place to meet up is a primary or breeding scrape. A breeding scrape is bigger and deeper than other scrapes, and it will smell. These areas are often used year after year. Position yourself downwind of the scrape or an approach and wait. It seems like dark, dreary days are best for this kind of hunting — probably because it's cooler out.

Does or Food Sources

You can "hunt" the does now, or work the food sources that the does will use. The idea is to get a crack at the bucks that will dutifully stay near the females. The problem with this scenario is it's not going to be nice and orderly. The buck is going to be chasing does all over that field or food plot. It will be tough to kill him. Calling usually won't work now; he's just chasing and wants to breed.

The solution is to hunt smaller food plots and feeding areas. If you're on a 100-acre corn field, the deer will go chasing off all over it. In a smaller plot, the whitetails are more likely to make a pass near your stand site.

Water Sources

Waterholes are great places to hunt during the rut. Water actually attracts deer in every rut phase. When bucks are searching for or chasing does, they can get by without food, but not without water. They put on the miles, and need to have water.

Natural water sources are good, but you have to identify where the deer

are going to come drink, and that can be random. But deer will take the path of least resistance. If you put the opportunity for water close by, they'll take it. We build food plots to attract and hold whitetails, why not waterholes?

We do this in the bluff country of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and you can do it anywhere. It's unbelievable how waterholes work in places where water is at a premium or a long way away. I have found little spring seeps coming out of the side of a hill, sat there, and had whitetails come right in.

Waterholes are very effective late morning through midday. Bucks need water, and they also know that does frequent the area. The bucks will just walk in and start drinking. If you have a warm and sunny day during the rut, this is the place to be.



Nicole Reeve with one of the bruiser bucks she has taken over the years. She took up hunting at an early age and was immediately hooked on bowhunting for whitetails. See more photos and videos of the Reeves' hunts at www.drivenhunter.com

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The Late Rut

When a buck loses his doe or breeds her, he goes on the move again. This is the late rut. Bucks are still active, but as soon as they find a doe, they're locked down again. So there's some movement going on, but not every deer is moving.

The Visibility Factor

Now is the time to work places with great visibility, where you can see the most ground. This usually means open fields. If a buck crosses, you can spot him and go to work. These are great places for decoys on early morning hunts. Use a buck-doe combo (bedded doe), or just a doe. You also have to call to get that deer's attention. You'll probably have to rattle to start.

After you have his attention, then grunt. Read his body language. Grunt again. If he comes, great. If he doesn't, snort-wheeze to challenge him. Dominant deer make that call. If he's the big guy, he's going to come over for a fight and to run that little guy (your decoy) out of the area.

Good decoy position is important. Don't put them too close. I'll put decoys 30 to 40 yards out so there's room for the buck to swing between me and the fakes.

You want the wind coming from the decoy to you. And you don't want the decoy too tight to you. I learned that the hard way, and had the buck approach too close, right under my tree, and I couldn't shoot. Or the buck could walk behind you and wind you if the decoy is too tight. Between you

and the decoy is the perfect spot for that buck.

This worked perfectly for my wife, Nicole, and me two seasons ago. A buck was walking away.

We rattled and got his attention. He looked, I grunted, and he circled right in between us and the decoy. Nicole smoked him at 20 yards — right in that sweet pocket between us and the decoy.

Scent Notes

You always have to play the wind. During the rut, it's easy to think there is room for forgiveness. There's not. Carbon clothes help by giving you that edge. Deer won't get the full whiff of you if there's an errant breeze. Carbon garments put the odds in your favor and give you a few extra seconds to draw or make your shot on a deer that would otherwise have been long gone. These clothes can create a buffer zone, and buy you the time you need.

Always dress in layers, and have extra clothes with you. The name of the game during the rut is sitting and waiting for long periods. You have to be dressed right.

Conclusion

The rut doesn't guarantee success. Far from it. To be honest, the rut can be a very challenging time to hunt. Your best bet is to understand what phase of the breeding season the whitetails are

It doesn't matter if you're hunting the early season, rut or the late season, you have to adopt a tough, never-say-die attitude when hunting mature whitetails.

Pat Reeve's Big-Buck Strategies

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in and adjust your approach accordingly. The chase, lock-down and late-rut phases each have their own kinds of hotspots where you need to set up for action. Knowing these places can produce the best rut reality of all for you — the need to drag out a good white-tailed buck you just arrowed.

— Minnesota's Pat Reeve is host of Driven TV on Outdoor Channel.



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Ah, West Texas in December. Where else do rut-crazed bucks charge the sound of rattling antlers with such tenacity? ■ by D&DH Editor Gordy Krahn

You're going to like hunting with this guy," my host for the hunt, Jonathan Harling, welcomed me to the 20,000-acre Canyon Ranch near Sonora, Texas, where we'd be hunting whitetails for the next three days. "He's the perfect guide for you." Jonathan and I had hunted together before and he knows I have a tough time sitting still — that I prefer to get out and stretch my legs, especially when hunting the expansive Texas landscape.

A requirement of the Canyon Ranch is that you're basically tethered to your guide, and for good reason. Like many whitetail operations in the Lone Star State, it manages for mature bucks and imposes a strict 4½-year-old minimum age requirement. I don't know about you, but I break into a sweat when I'm tasked to define the subtle differences between a 3½- and 4½-year-old buck. I appreciated the help, and the fact that Danny Adams, my guide, is a commando-style hunter suited me fine.

The first morning out was chilly by Texas standards — just 20 degrees. But I'd just come off a brutally cold Alberta mule deer hunt and was thinking nothing but warm thoughts about hunting whitetails during the tail end of the rut. Danny gave me a quick geography lesson as we cruised the dim ranch roads. We were hunting the Edwards Plateau Region commonly referred to as Texas Hill Country — rolling scrub brush terrain, where white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, wild hogs, and a host of free-range exotic species roam in impressive numbers.

After a short ride, Danny pulled the truck to the side of the road and killed the engine. "Bring only what you need," he said as he slid out the driver's door. "We're going to take a pretty good walk." I grabbed my rifle, shooting sticks and a bottle of water, leaving my daypack and camera in the back seat.

We had walked in a couple hundred yards when Danny leaned over and whispered, "Let's set up here." After a half-dozen similar stands, where we rattled up four or five smallish but aggressive bucks, it was apparent what Danny was looking for — a clear shooting lane downwind with heavy cover behind us.

A photograph of a hunter in a field. On the left, a hunter's arm in camouflage sleeves is visible, holding a compound bow with a yellow quiver. In the center, a bolt-action rifle with a scope is propped up against a tree branch. The background shows a field of tall, dry grass under a clear sky with some bare trees.

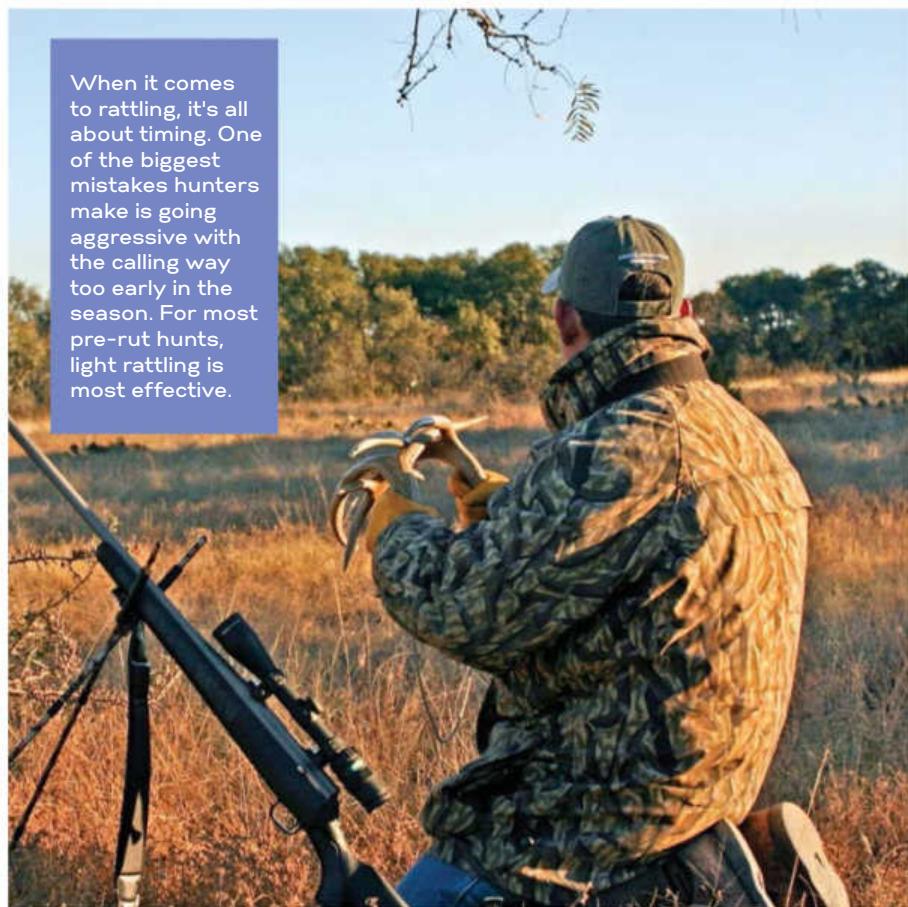
Shake,
Rattle
and Roll

"Playing the wind is extremely important," Danny explained as we circled back to the truck. "But a lot of guys get too caught up in scent control. When you're rattling during the rut, you want to call downwind or to a crosswind. When those bucks are coming to the horns they're like teenage boys at a high school dance — they have only one thing on their minds. Sure, they're going to circle downwind to some degree, but if you set up right and watch that downwind lane, that buck's going to be dead before it matters."

"Yeah, but what about judging age?" I countered. "Remember, nothing younger than 4½ years. It's one thing making the call if you're sitting in a box blind where you have all the time in the world to look the guy over. Another if you have to make a snap decision."

"First off, you can't focus on the antlers," Danny said. "That's a common mistake — everybody likes a good set of horns and it's the first thing people see, but it isn't necessarily an accurate indicator of age. Normally when a buck comes in to the horns, he's not in a big hurry to leave. Take as much time as he gives you to look him over — the bulky body, sagging back and belly, loose skin on the face, the rack — all of those indicators of age. With

When it comes to rattling, it's all about timing. One of the biggest mistakes hunters make is going aggressive with the calling way too early in the season. For most pre-rut hunts, light rattling is most effective.



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The author collects his Texas buck. Rattling techniques work so well in this region because of the vast landscape, balanced buck-to-doe ratio and relatively light hunting pressure.

was much warmer when we headed out the next morning but the wind was howling. Once again, we spent the morning rattling and got a few responses, but the deer seemed a lot more nervous in the wind — just a quick look and they were gone. The previous day had taught me one thing: When these bucks come to the antlers they come hard and fast and you need to be ready. I was completely relying on my guide to quickly age the deer. When the bucks showed up I was WAY too focused on the antlers to be much help, and I just needed to concentrate on making the shot.

Our setups reminded me of hunting coyotes in similar terrain. In fact, I'm sure we'd have swapped horns for a howler we'd have called in fur on many of the stands. And just like with coyotes, you never know from which direction they might come. We had multiple bucks show up from different directions at several stands.

The wind had settled down a bit

a little time and practice you'll know what you've got in front of you. If you're unsure, let him go."

A Different Day

What a difference a day can make. It

the antlers 20 seconds when I caught movement to our right. A buck was coming fast and my first impression was that he's a shooter judging from the glimpses of antler I was seeing through the cedars. "This can't be the buck we saw cross the road," I whispered to Danny, who was quickly trying to size him up.

"Nope, but he's an older buck," and Danny gave me the green light to shoot.

I flipped off the safety as the buck stopped behind a thick cedar and then panned the rifle as he came around the other side and into plain view at about 60 yards. The frontal shot at point blank range was lethal and the buck piled up after a 40-yard dash.

"Why didn't you let him get a little closer?" Danny laughed and slapped my shoulder?

"That was close enough for me!" I sighed with relief. "Man, I can't believe how committed he was to the horns! These bucks are really fired up!"

As we drove back to the ranch house, Danny gave me a final lesson on rattling. "First off, the reason rattling is so effective here is because of the deer density," he said. "If you can keep the buck-to-doe ratio reasonable like they do on this ranch the bucks are going to be very competitive." The other key ingredient, Danny says, is timing. "The biggest mistake hunters make is rattling during the wrong time of year," Danny said. "If the deer

by the time afternoon rolled around and we drove to the far end of the ranch where we planned to get back out on foot. I nearly did a face-plant on the dash when Danny suddenly stopped the truck and grabbed his binoculars from the dash. It took me a second or two to spot what he was looking at — a buck on the edge of the road a quarter-mile up. And then it was gone, slipping into the thick brush. "Looked like a pretty good buck and he seems to be alone," Danny said, lowering his binoculars. "Let's get after him."

We eased out of the truck and sneaked through the scrub oaks and cedars until we found a small opening, where we quickly set up with a crosswind blowing from left to right, facing the direction where we last saw the buck. Danny wasn't on



Texas Whitetail Gear Bag

As with any hunting location, the landscape, hunting method, weather and many other factors define the best rifle/optics choices for the task. Here's what I brought to Texas for my late-season whitetail hunt.

Firepower: Thompson/Center Venture/.30-06. Thompson/Center's Venture bolt-action rifle has become one of the top names in the market with its class-leading features and quality. With its optional highly corrosion resistant Weather Shield finish, it's designed to take anything Mother Nature can throw at it. Visit: www.TcArms.com

Good glass: Trijicon RS20 3-9X40mm Riflescope. The Texas Hill Country terrain is brushy and visibility is often restricted so a variable scope in the lower range is best. Run-and-gun hunters will want to keep the scope set at 3X for those quick encounters, cranking it up when the country allows. Low light? No problem. The TR20 has multi-layer coated lenses for superior light transmission, and its aiming point is illuminated through the use of fiber-optics and tritium. No failure-prone batteries! Visit: www.Trijicon.com

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- Gordy Krahn

aren't in rut, you're just in the woods making a bunch of noise."

— Gordy Krahn is Editor of Deer & Deer Hunting magazine and co-host of Deer & Deer Hunting-TV.



Aging Deer on the Hoof

by Gerald Almy

When the buck stepped out from the thick wall of brush I saw immediately that he was an old deer. He walked stiffly, pained with arthritis. His belly sagged and loose skin hung around his face and neck. The nose was Roman-shaped. The legs looked short. His rack was impressive, but that meant less to me than the number of years he had survived. I estimated he was over 5 years old. He definitely looked past his prime.

Easing the rifle to my shoulder, I found his blocky gray chest in the crosshairs and squeezed off. I heard the bullet strike home. Minutes later I was admiring the oldest buck I had ever shot — aged later in a laboratory by tooth rings at 7½ years.

It was a momentous occasion for me. I've been fortunate to shoot some big bucks over the years, but this was by far the oldest I had ever taken.

Some hunters want to shoot lots of deer. Others seek out a record book buck. Still others like to take young bucks or does because they feel they offer the best meat.

I have to admit I am obsessed by age in a deer. I love to seek out old animals, since they are challenging to hunt and fairly rare. They have eluded hunters and predators for many years, are nearing the end of their lives, and are difficult to encounter, let alone harvest. And maybe there's some empathy, too, since like the old arthritic buck, I am also entering the last years of my time allotted on Earth.

But whether you want to pursue the oldest buck or just want to seek out one that has reached 3 or 4 years of age, it helps to know the physical characteristics of that age class of whitetail. Racks can give clues, but the best way to age a buck is by its body characteristics. Learn the physical

traits of each age-class, and then you'll know whether you want to pass it up, or if it fits the age recommended for harvesting on the property you're hunting.

Here's a rundown on how to age deer by their body characteristics. It's not a foolproof system, because individual deer might not follow the normal trends. But it should work for most bucks.



1½ Years Old: These deer are sometimes described as looking like "a doe with antlers." They have a feminine, delicate look with long legs, narrow hindquarters and a thin neck. They might have spikes or as many as 8 or 10 small points. But these are spindly racks and not easily mistaken for those of a mature deer.

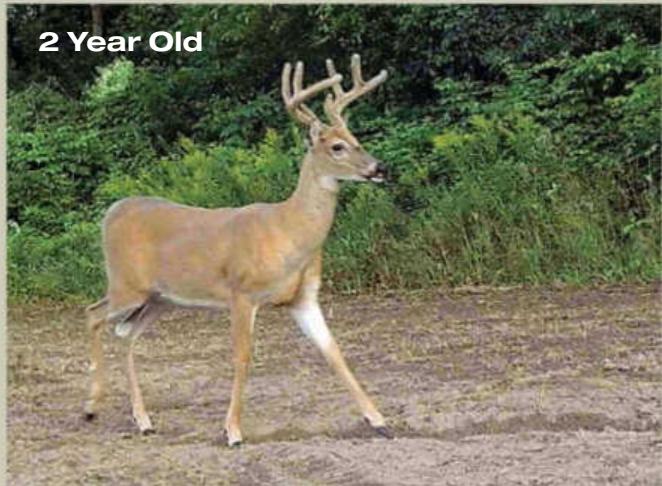
2½ Years Old: These bucks' hindquarters have filled out a little, and their necks swell ever so slightly during the rut. But their legs still look long. Backs and stomachs are flat with no sagging. Faces have a narrow, pointed look. Outside antler spreads are typically still inside the width of the ears, meaning less than 16 inches.

3½ Years Old: These bucks are getting heavy chest areas, but the chest is still distinct from the neck and does not "blend together" as it will in older, more mature bucks. The hindquarters have become rounded instead of square like they are on younger bucks.

The chest will appear deeper than the hindquarter area. These deer are thickly muscled, often compared to a well-bred racehorse.

Their noses will be broader and squarer than the thin, pointed snouts of younger bucks. Three-year-old bucks have achieved more than two-thirds

2 Year Old



of their potential antler growth. They behave aggressively, often challenging older bucks.

4½ Years Old: These bucks' necks swell fully in the rut. The neck appears to blend seamlessly into the chest, joining the body just above the front legs. The neck is thicker than the head during breeding season and tarsals become very dark and stained.

The waist is as deep as the chest, but the belly does not sag. The legs start to appear short because the body is so thick. Typically the rack has achieved 80 to 90 percent of its full potential.

These deer are often mostly nocturnal in hard-pressed hunting areas and tend to stay in thick cover during daylight hours. They fight for dominance and often have broken racks and up to two dozen wounds following the rut from raucous battles.

5½ Years Old: This is about the oldest age that can be distinguished on the hoof in most cases. From here on up deer will look largely the same unless they decline in extreme old age, meaning 7 to 10 years or more.

Both the back and belly tend to sag down, and there is loose skin on the face and body. The nose is typically short and squat, often Roman-shaped. Eyes are sometimes "squinty."

The chest of a 5-year-old buck blends into the neck in one solid mass. Tarsals become extremely dark during the rut. Racks might begin to sprout kickers and non-typical points.

Often these deer walk stiffly from arthritis and wounds. Some of them might even shy from battle with younger bucks that are in their prime. Antlers typically peak at either 5 or 6 years of age. After that, they often decline, sometimes dramatically.

I saw a sad example of that decline in antlers this past spring when I discovered a dead buck while shed hunting. He had apparently died from either natural causes or wounds inflicted by another buck.

When I showed the jaw to the regional wildlife biologist, he was stunned. Even though he had examined thousands of deer jaws for hunters, he said he'd never seen one that old. He judged it to be 8½ years — or older!

But the deer's antlers were poor. They only had 6 points and scored 110. Doubtless he was far superior to that at 5 or 6 years of age. But regardless of the rack, he had accomplished something few bucks ever do. He had lived to reach a ripe old age.

Whether you want to dedicate yourself to pursuing a rare buck like that or simply want to know the difference between 2 and 3-year-olds, keep these physical characteristics of each age class in mind. Far more than antlers, these body and facial traits will help you make a very accurate age estimate before you pull the trigger or release your arrow.

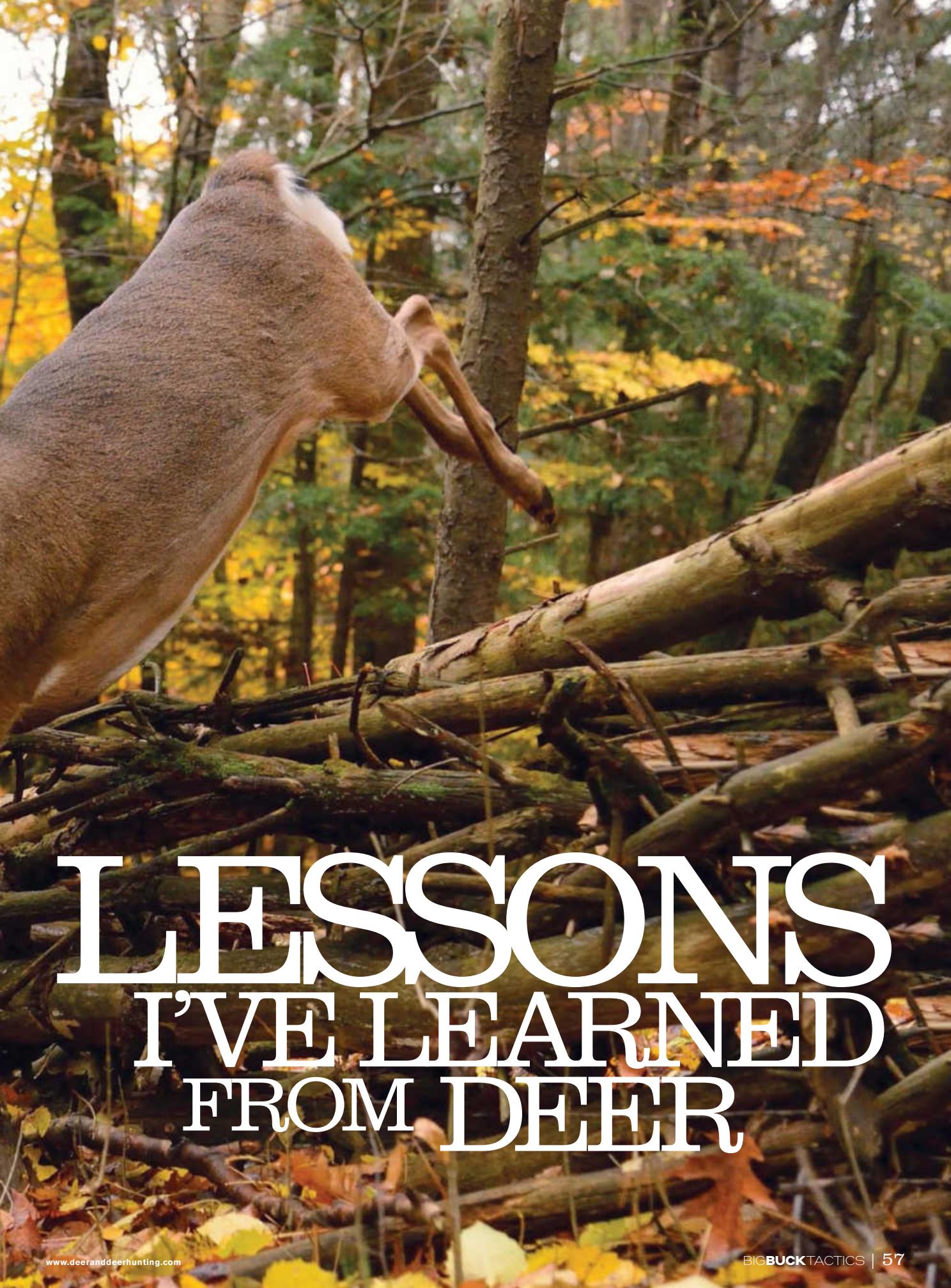


Whitetails are incredible creatures and in spite of the many advances in hunting technology over the past 30 years, man is still at a disadvantage when it comes to outsmarting them.

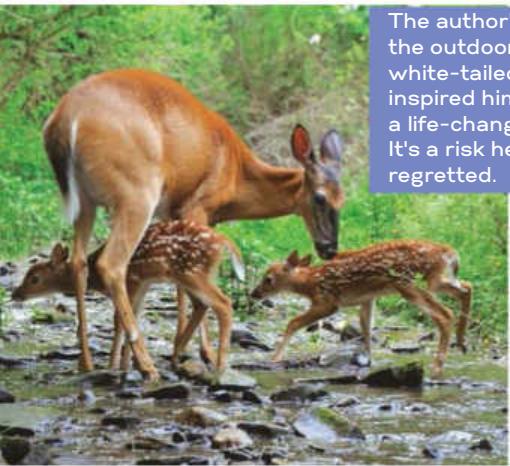
■ Text and Photos by Charles J. Alsheimer

Thirty-six years ago, I set out on a journey that even I could not comprehend. My story truly is a blessing scripted from above. In the spring of 1979 my wife and I had to make a decision. Was I going to remain in the corporate sales and marketing profession, or would I move into the totally different world of becoming a full-time outdoor writer and nature photographer? At the time my wife was nearing the end of a two-year leave-of-absence from public school teaching, following the birth of our son Aaron. Part of the agreement was that she had to tell her school well in advance if she would return to teaching in the fall.

After wrestling for weeks over what to do, we decided she would return to teaching, I'd resign my sales and marketing position — with at the time the largest producer of wood office furniture in the world — and jump head first into the unknown waters of the hunting world. To complicate the situation, several friends and family members told me I was crazy. After all, why would a person trade in a great paying job with many benefits to pursue the unknown. A couple of people even said I had lost my mind. At the time there were only five or six hunting-related magazines to market to and only one magazine, *Deer & Deer Hunting*, that was totally dedicated to white-tailed deer. Couple this with the fact that in 1979 America was in the throes of one of the worst economies since the end of World War II. Yes, it was a pretty scary time to throw the career dice and hope they'd come up snake eyes. So, why would I do such a foolish thing?



LESSONS I'VE LEARNED FROM DEER



The author's love of the outdoors and white-tailed deer inspired him to take a life-changing risk. It's a risk he's never regretted.

As I pondered making the decision I thought about a lot of things. I deeply loved America, her traditions and was concerned with the direction my country was going. As a Vietnam vet, I had seen first-hand what third world countries engaged in war were all about. Though I could see myself making a career in the corporate business world, I had come to realize that it was not a perfect fit for me.

Yeti Coolers has a great slogan, "Inside you there is an outside you." That was me. Suits and ties were not

my favorite way to dress. I was more a blue jeans, boots and camo guy who loved the outdoors more than corporate board rooms. In 1971, I had also fallen in love with photographing God's creation, eventually everything from chickadees to grizzlies, but mostly the animal I admired most, the white-tailed deer. So, at age 32, with the prospects of no weekly paycheck for the foreseeable future, I entered into the outdoor world.

I'm often asked about my career and how I kept it all going for three-plus decades. My answer is simple: the challenge, how it benefited my family, the fascination I have for the whitetail and the passion I have to share God's creation through words, photos and speaking engagements.

The Challenge

Many have accused me of being a risk taker. Perhaps, but not to the degree that I'm willing to make foolish decisions. Certainly my 1979 career switch had its risks. That said, I did not jump into the outdoor career field blindly. Prior to making the move I studied the market carefully and felt the hunting industry had the potential to be dynamic. For starters, whitetail hunting was a huge tradition in rural America, so the lure of the hunt was strong. Secondly, the baby-boom generation was just coming of age (20 to 40 years old), which meant more hunters with expendable income taking to the woods. At the same time whitetail populations were expanding at a rapid rate. So, in my mind these three reasons, along with several more, caused me to feel the stage was set for great things to take place in the hunting industry, and I wanted to be a part of it. My assessment proved right.

I believe every person has a God-given gift. I'm no computer geek, electrician, auto mechanic, math whiz or whatever. I come from a family of business owners and have always been fascinated by the business world. When I went off to college I majored in business and fell in love with the intricacies of how business works. So, I used this background to study the outdoor industry. I quickly realized that if I was going to make a living in the hunting world I'd have to focus on white-tailed deer because 80 percent of America's hunters were avid whitetail hunters. At one point in the early 1980s I did a market analysis of the hunting magazines available and found that for every 10 photos and articles published six-plus were of white-tailed deer. Though I've photographed nearly all of North America's big game, it's the whitetail that has been my main focus because of my passion for them. That's where the



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money was and is to this day.

As I progressed through the '80s and '90s I realized that if I wanted to take my career to the next level I needed to do more than just hunt, write about and photograph whitetails. That move came over 20 years ago when I decided to raise whitetails to study their behavior. It turned out to be one of the smartest business decisions of my career.

It's one thing to glean information about whitetails from hunting and photography, but neither can come close to the education you get from being with them on a daily basis year round. To say I've had an incredible education raising whitetails for more than two decades would be a vast understatement.

Family

The center of my earthly existence is not the whitetail, it's my family. In the spring of 1972 I married a special woman who has been my best friend and soul mate for 43 years. She's been an incredible wife and mother to our son and understands my business more than she lets on.

To make it in this business every family member needs to understand what it takes to be successful. Traveling to hunt and photograph can be stressful on a family. So, rather than be away from home for extended periods of time I planned things so that I was seldom away from home more than a week at a time.

While growing up my dad was a successful businessman who put his business ahead of his family. Consequently, we were not as close as I felt a father and son could be. Because of this I vowed that if I ever had a son (or daughter) I'd be a big part of his or her life. Throughout my career our son Aaron and I have been about as

close as a father and son can be. He's traveled with me on photo and hunting trips from Florida's Everglades to Alaska's tundra. Along the way he's become an excellent hunter, and next to my wife, my best friend. Without them I never could have made it in this business.

The Animal

I'd hate to think what my life would have been like without the whitetail. It was what truly introduced me to nature. As a little kid the graceful figure of a mature buck running across a plowed field on our farm was what lit my fire, a fire that has kept me heading back to the woods for more than 50 years.

Words cannot fully share with you my love for the whitetail. I've seen them being born and I've seen them die. In between I've witnessed and photographed about every behavior they can exhibit. The late giant in the hunting world Erwin Bauer once said, "The white-tailed deer is the greatest game animal in North America." I ditto that and add this: The whitetail is hands down nature's decathlete. No other big game animal can think, run, jump, hide, smell and live in man's back yard like the whitetail. It is the whole package. When you couple this with its stunning beauty, it is easy to see why millions of hunters spend over \$50 billion dollars annually pursuing them.

When you put together all the physical attributes a whitetail possesses, is it any wonder that they can survive unlike few animals on Earth? They are incredible creatures and in spite of the many advances in hunting technology over the past 30 years, man is still at a disadvantage when it comes to outsmarting the whitetail.

Whitetails, wherever they are found

are the real deal, ultimate survivors. Their athleticism and physical attributes have allowed them to outmaneuver and outsmart the cagiest creature for centuries, and this will no doubt be the case until the end of time.

The Bottom Line

I sometimes wonder about people's values. There's a popular bumper sticker that reads, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Sadly, too many in America are swept up by this mentality. Gadgets, toys, bricks and mortar are nothing more than things. Personally, I think Chuck Swindoll's quote has more meaning. "Life is like a coin, you can spend it anyway you want, but you can only spend it once. And then he said, "The greatest things in life are not things — the greatest things in life are experiences and relationships."

Life is sacred, and one of the greatest relationships in my life is my walk with the God of this universe. After taking over a million photos, hunting whitetails throughout North America, lecturing to over a half-million sportsmen, and witnessing God's creation up close and personal, all I can say is that I'm humbled and in awe of the platform God has given me. I learned a long time ago that a hunter's life is not about antlers, it's about the joy of the journey.

If I were to die tomorrow I'd have no regrets. Thanks to God and one of his creatures — the white-tailed deer — I've been blessed beyond measure. A man can't ask for any more.

—Charles Alsheimer is a deer behavior expert from western New York.



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OF
JAW-DROPPING
POWER.

| FPS | 350 |
|-------------------|------------------|
| LBS | 4 |
| BRACE HEIGHT | 6" |
| AXLE-TO-AXLE | 32" |
| PEAK DRAW WEIGHT | 45-60, 55-70 lbs |
| DRAW LENGTH RANGE | 25 1/2"-30" |
| LET OFF | 75% |



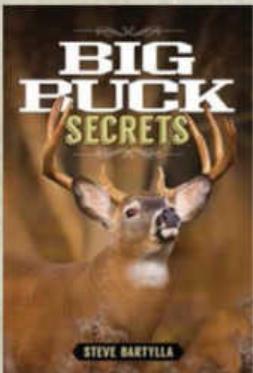
Walk Among

LEGENDS

BIG BUCK Gear Bag

Deer & Deer Hunting 2016 Almanac

If you're like us and think about deer hunting year round, the wait is over. The publisher of Deer & Deer Hunting magazine has packed the "2016 Deer Hunters' Almanac" with valuable state-by-state information, in addition to tips for deer hunters of all ages and experience levels. For more than 25 years, the "Deer Hunters' Almanac" has been a reference guide for hunters everywhere. It features firearm and archery accuracy secrets, deer behavior research, public-land hunting tactics, land management practices, how to improve your shooting form, slug gun advice, blood-trailing insights and much more. Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU HA2016)



Big Buck Secrets

Packed with fantastic information from veteran big buck hunter, land manager and longtime guide Steve Bartylla, you'll get loads of insights in his latest book, "Big Buck Secrets." Bartylla has guided and advised landowners in the Midwest for years, so he knows what it takes to grow, find and hunt big whitetails. In "Big Bucks Secrets" you'll learn about a well-rounded approach to buck hunting, scouting new hunting areas including public land, calling strategies, hunting during the rut, understanding mature buck behavior, aggressive and creative techniques, and more – all aimed to help you bag the biggest buck of your life. Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU T4648)

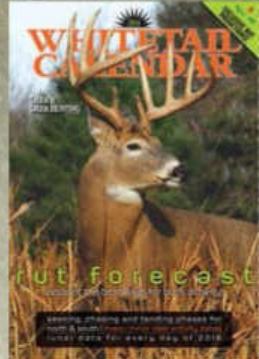
Bush Hog Razorback

Taking care of brush and grasses around deer camp and your home is easier with a Bush Hog Razorback series mower. You'll find the same legendary engineering and durable reliability in the Razorback line as in the heartier Bush Hog models designed for heavier use. The Razorback series has three models in 4-, 5- and 6-foot cutting widths. They handle weeds, grasses and brush up to 1 inch in diameter and at a minimum cutting height of 2 inches. For many weedy areas at deer camp this could be a superb investment to get the job done opening fields, creating better fawning or forage cover, and helping wildlife such as deer, turkeys and small game. Even better, the Razorback line is economically priced so you'll get great, long-lasting value. Info: www.BushHog.com



D&DH 2016 Wall Calendar

From the publisher of Deer & Deer Hunting magazine, the "2016 Whitetails Wall Calendar" features the work of deer researchers Wayne Laroche and Charlie Alsheimer, who reveal the 2016 whitetail rut prediction based on years of lunar cycle research. Utilize this deer moon phase calendar to find out which days bucks will be seeking and chasing so you can time the rut for the best time to hunt. The calendar features amazing white-tailed deer photography, capturing deer in all the seasons and providing deer activity charts. It's not only the most useful calendar you'll own, but also quite possibly the ultimate gift for any deer hunter! Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU T8705)



D&DH Logo T-Shirt

Wear the hippest deer hunting T-shirt ever to show your love of Deer & Deer Hunting and make all of your friends super-jealous, too. This comfortable, 100-percent cotton shirt features the "stacked" D&DH logo and will turn heads wherever you wear it. It's great for layering under other clothes on cool days or for giving to your best girl to wear at night. Right? Yeah, that's right. She'll appreciate it. Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU U6086P)



Stretchback Grunt Call

The Stretchback Grunt Call from DUEL Game Calls has a special Duel Chamber technology that helps you make realistic white-tailed deer vocalizations. Your sounds are channeled through two separate chambers,

which mimics the way real animals project sound, and produces an anatomically accurate, vocally realistic call. By extending the rubber flex tube, you can instantly change the pitch of the call and make the sounds of a small, big or moving buck, as well as all types of buck grunts. It features a FreezeFree design, too, and won't stop working like other grunt calls in cold weather. Info: www.DuelGameCalls.com

Evolved Whitetail Ale

Deer love the tasty nutrition of barley, oats and wheat, without doubt, so it's only logical that Evolved's new Whitetail Ale combines those favorite foods in a nutritious package. Whitetail Ale is created through a fermentation process of the three grains that preserves the vitamins, enzymes and amino acids while also offering healthy protein and fat. It's a super combo deer can't resist. Plus, along with a hearty rice bran aroma, Whitetail Ale has the Wildgame Innovations' Glo-Cote ultraviolet additive. Glo-Cote has a neon blue glow deer can see day or night. Check out this new attractant for your hunting or camera surveys. Info: www.Evolved.com





The Firminator

Simply put, the Firminator is one of the coolest hunting tools you can invest in if you have a large amount of property, are in a deer club or have friends who want to split costs. The Firminator combines three tools in one unit: a disc harrow, seed dispenser and cultipacker, the latter being vitally important for good seed beds and germination. Multiple models for ATVs or tractors, along with a great variety of settings, allow you to prepare the best food plot possible. The seed box handles tiny clover to corn, sunflowers and seed blends. The cast iron cultipacker has multiple notched discs and scrapers to prevent buildup. Firminator G-3 and Firmiseeder (without disc harrow) come in 4-, 5-, 6- and 8-foot ATV models. The 16-foot cultipacker upgrade is for sandy or silty soils; its larger 4-inch wide wheels roll over the soils easier. Info: www.TheFirminator.com

Gourmet Venison DVD

The "Gourmet Venison with Stacy Harris" DVD compiles tips for cooking venison along with some of Stacy's favorite recipes. Any venison fan will benefit from Stacy's love of wild game, heirloom vegetables and field-to-table gourmet cooking in this great DVD. Learn 15 delicious recipes through step-by-step instruction on how to prepare the meals. Stacy, her husband and their seven children hunt, fish and garden throughout the year, so these delicious recipes have been given her family's "stamp of approval" and you'll find them just as appealing. Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU 9156)



Heartland Autumn Addiction

Heartland Wildlife Institute's lineup of great attractants and supplements includes Autumn Addiction, a powerful attractant containing soybeans, whole-roasted corn and a supercharged energy nugget. Deer (and turkeys) flat-out love this combination. Autumn Addiction also contains a blend of molasses and apple flavoring. It's perfect for enhancing your feeder corn and deer can't resist it. It includes protein, fat, fiber, calcium, phosphorus and more to help deer achieve optimum health. Use it during and after the season, where legal, and for your camera surveys. Info: www.HeartlandWildlifeInstitute.com



Hunter Safety System Lifeline

If you like to hunt from ultra-high places, Hunter Safety System now has you covered with the Lifeline 42 safety accessory. This longer rope for your Prusik knot on your safety harness accommodates stands up to 44 feet high. It's good for hunters with cameramen or those who just like

being up higher in the tree. The convenience of the Lifeline helps hunters be more confident – and safer. Once it's securely on the tree above the stand, climbing and descending is much safer. The Lifeline 42 features the woven reflective strips for visibility and a silicone cover to prevent noise. Info: www.HunterSafetySystem.com

Millennium L200 Stand

Ladder stands are among the most comfortable ways to enjoy deer hunting, and with the Millennium L200 ladder stand you'll have ample room for gear or a partner. The L200 is great if you're hunting solo because you can have your pack at hand and spread out a bit. If you hunt with a youngster or your spouse, they're going to enjoy the hunt thanks to the ComfortTech seats, adjustable shooting rails and folding foot rests. Millennium's L100 (single) and dual-seat L200 stands are where you want to be this season when you need a ladder stand for great hunting. Info: www.MillenniumStands.com



Hawke Frontier Scopes

The Frontier family of scopes features index-matched optics and a 6X optical system, delivering premium image quality and increased flexibility for hunters and shooters. Frontier's optical system uses a 6X magnification ratio to make the switch from close to long-range shooting easier. It's housed in a compact, durable 30mm mono-tube and available in 2.5-15x50mm or 5-30x50mm models, both with side focus parallax correction and LR Dot or the new 20X TMX reticle that uses mil spacing on 20X and offers half-mil tick marks for additional aiming points. Info: www.HawkeOptics.com

BIG BUCK Gear Bag

Ozonics

Ozonics blankets a hunter's downwind scent zone with airborne, scent-transforming ozone, so deer won't smell

human scent. Serious

hunters go to great lengths to control human scent and Ozonics should be part of that effort. The Ozonics unit is compact, lightweight and easy to mount. Foremost, Ozonics is safe, meeting or exceeding U.S. federal safety standards for ozone exposure. Ozonics also is guaranteed! If after a fair trial you do not experience a dramatic reduction in the number of downwind deer that bust you, Ozonics will refund your money in the same calendar year as purchase. Info: www.OzonicsHunting.com



Truglo Storm Arrow Rest

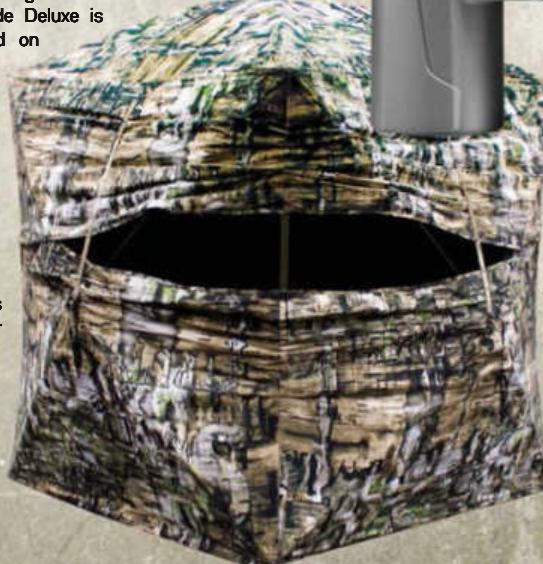
With adjustable brushes that securely hold an arrow at almost any angle, the TruGlo Storm arrow rest provides reduced contact, and that minimizes friction while

increasing speed and accuracy. The ultra-tough, all-weather design is great for hunting, target practice and 3D competition. The Storm features a dual-coil launcher, which is replaceable, and is easy to install for beginning to veteran shooters. The machined aluminum has a black finish with laser-engraved reference marks. Info: www.TruGlo.com

Primos Double Wide Deluxe

If the Primos Double Wide Deluxe ground blind got much bigger you could maybe just live in it during deer season!

The Double Bull Double Wide Deluxe is packed with features based on years of hunter input and feedback. It has a zipperless door for silent entry, silent sliding window openings for firearm or bow use and a huge footprint at 70 inches high with a 60x60-inch floor. That's more than enough to move around easily, quietly, even with kids who might be jumpy (or sleepy). It also has a redesigned hub system for easier setup and take down. Info: www.Primos.com



Smokey's Pre-Orbital Gland Lure

A licking branch is the No. 1 key to success when you're hunting a mock scrape. So it stands to reason that using the best scent possible on the licking branch is critical. Smokey's Preorbital Lure is collected from the matching glands of real deer so you're getting fresh, unique and one-of-a-kind buck scent. Deer rub their heads on licking branches to deposit preorbital gland scent. Smokey's Preorbital Lure is widely recognized as a huge factor in helping attract and fire up big bucks. Whether you're collecting camera survey info or setting up a mock scrape to kill the buck of your life, Smokey's Preorbital is a must-have tool for your hunting season. Info: www.ShopDeerHunting.com (SKU V6534)



Weston Slow Cookers

If you don't have a slow cooker in your deer camp or home, just what the heck's wrong with you? We're kidding (sort of ...), but having a slow cooker is a great

way to prepare meals overnight or during the day.

Toss in a roast, seasonings and veggies, maybe some ground meat and fixin's for chili, and you're good to go. Soups and stews? Not a problem. Weston Supply has several new slow cookers this year in 5- and 8-quart sizes, including those in Realtree camouflage, and a 7-quart programmable model. These really are fantastic accessories for any kitchen and scads of recipes are available to help you make great meals with your deer meat or other wild game. Info: www.WestonSupply.com



Zeiss Terra Binoculars

Carl Zeiss Sports Optics has teamed with Under Armour for the new TERRA ED 32mm binoculars, available in 8x32mm and 10x32mm models. These join the Terra line that includes 8x42mm and 10x42mm models. The new 32mm binoculars are equipped with an exclusive Under Armour Bino Harness that has durable, thick

hypalon attachments, solid metal hardware and adjustable elastic straps for complete comfort. Terra ED binoculars feature SCHOTT ED glass with ZEISS MC multi-coated lenses, so the images are always bright and clear, even in low-light conditions when wildlife is more active. Info: www.Zeiss.com/sports-optics



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